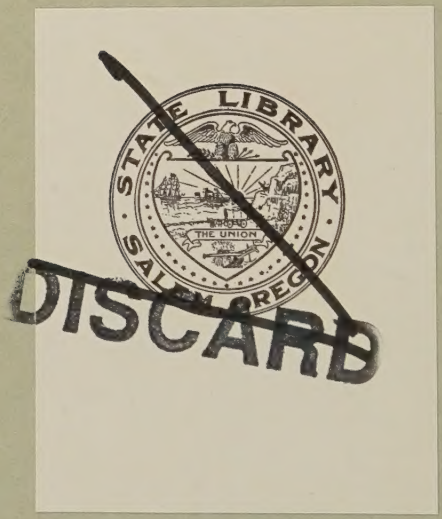
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POETS OF AMERICA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

VERSE

GLAD OF EARTH
THE EARTH TURNS SOUTH
THE TIDE COMES IN
JEHOVAH

FICTION

MOUNTAIN
NIGGER

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

POETS OF AMERICA

BY

CLEMENT WOOD

AUTHOR OF
"THE TIDE COMES IN," "THE EARTH TURNS SOUTH,"
"JEHOVAH," ETC.

NEW YORK

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Biographical facts, critical appreciations and copious quotations make up these brief studies of American poets from Poe and Whitman to the greater and lesser moderns. The essays, though thesis-ridden and reflecting always the critic's personal enthusiasms and prejudices, are nevertheless stimulating and contain many instances of fine appreciation and critical insight.

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TO

THE MEMORY OF

WARFIELD CREATH RICHARDSON

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Seed and the First-fruits	1
II.	Edgar Allan Poe: Kubla in Hell	13
III.	Walt Whitman: A Mystic Volcano	35
IV.	Adah Isaacs Menken: A Forgotten Deborah	56
V.	Sidney Lanier: Music Weds Poetry	68
VI.	Emily Dickinson: The Shrinking Seer	82
VII.	The Fallow Years: New Folk Rhythms	97
VIII.	Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Darkening Hill	119
IX.	Robert Frost: The Twilight of New England	142
X.	Edgar Lee Masters: Caliban upon Helicon	163
XI.	John Hall Wheelock: Light on a Hill	181
XII.	Edna St. Vincent Millay: A Clever Sappho	199
XIII.	Amy Lowell: A Parnassian July Fourth	214
XIV.	Vachel Lindsay: Jazz and the Poet	229
XV.	Carl Sandburg: A Hymn from Hogwallow	246
XVI.	Elinor Wylie: The Jewelled Brain	262
XVII.	Rose O'Neill: A Sister of Campion	275
XVIII.	The Waste Land	290
XIX.	Sappho's Cousins	314
XX.	Out of the Depths	346
XXI.	Poets to Come	375
	Index	387

POETS OF AMERICA

THE POETS OF AMERICA

CHAPTER I

The Seed and the First-fruits

Three hundred years ago began the domestication of this land, by the diverging dwellers on two islands slightly smaller than New Mexico and only one-fifth as large as Alaska. The year before the English came, another European people had settled to the north; forty years before that, a more southerly people had commenced their possession of the southland. Spain fought for the Floridas, Holland and Sweden disputed the rich mid-region, France staked out the snowland and the vast river basin beyond the sparse fringe of Anglo-Saxon settlers. The English proved a Roman title to the land, and held it until it was English enough to wean itself. Those former colonists have stretched today to thirty times the spread of their mother isles; they are more than twice as populous. In spite of a constant surf of immigration from every stream and stagnant backwater of man's earth, that land today is at core English, and at surface predominantly English. In thought, in speech, in law, in institutions, in large stupidity and rare lightning flash, it is blood, sinew, and bone of its motherland.

The Englishman, contrary to wide belief, was not a special and ultimate creation, sprung, like a bemonocled Minerva, from the respectful brow of God or nature. His is a threefold ancestry. There was first the Celt, foaled in fairyland, a fellow of infinite wonder and jest, an amalgam of quick tears and quicker laughter. He was apt to worship a dewdrop on a clover leaf, and dull at seeing a forest or a hilled horizon. He gave England, out of his shadowy Camelot, her enduring national hero. He gave England ecstasy. After him came a somber Macbeth-Malvolio, the Anglo-Saxon. He could reason, where the Celt gamboled in fantasy. One of his eyes gleamed at the right, one scowled constantly at the wrong. Frequently both were turned inward, to brood upon the withering gravity of fate. From gray and gloomy seas, from dank fog-shrouded fenlands, he drew his vision of life: a morbid exultation, a massive and abiding fear. His gift was contemplation—stodgy, logical, often despairing. Last came a roistering gallant, the Norman, sparkling with audacious energy and mirth. His stern levity soon softened to a ritual of satiny courtesy. He gave England zest, gusto. These are her sources, these her traits.

The Celt had his fantastic back-broken epics, of the half-gods the Tuatha-De-Danann, of Cuchullin, of Finn, of Arthur—fancy-straining tales of gymnastic marvel. The Anglo-Saxon brought in his memory the somber well-knit saga of Beowulf: different marvels, told and received as realism, with grave moral tags as punctuation. On the lips of the Norman sparkled the Song of Roland, with wonders told as quizzically as men speak to men of Santa Claus or honesty in politics. The first was primarily mythic; the second, heroic; the last, human. One above the other these races lived in the land. The

Celt had his back to the sea-wall in Ireland and Scotland, and remained, a sullen underling, in the rest of Britain; the Anglo-Saxon brooded his former earlship, his present churlish serfdom; the Norman flung his falcon into the bright sky, and listened to glittering tales of Charlemagne and Alexander, of Ilion and the Round Table. These became at last one people, the English, speaking an English tongue, singing an English song. Three strands were woven into the song: ecstasy, contemplation, and the loud joy of living. It is more than idle whimsey to hail in these today the still living voices of the three diverse peoples who became one. One by one they can be heard echoing across the broken hill-land of English verse, at times solitary, at times in double or triple harmony. Something of all three is of course in each poet; but the diverse strands may still be distinguished.

At the beginning, all three speak distinctly. Chaucer, with his gay Norman gusto, outdazzled William Langland's heavier-footed Anglo-Saxon rhythms, and the fainter whisper of the Scotch poets and the people's ballads. Young England in this hour was perforce provincial: he had his hose from France, his doublet from Italy. Chaucer's continental attire outshone the humbler homespuns. After a breathing space, Wyatt borrowed the sonnet from Italy, and Surrey acclimated heroic blank verse, perhaps from the same source. These two blent Norman and Anglo-Saxon, zest and sober reflection. Their mood held an un-Gallic melancholy and earnestness; but the men! The one, lover of Anne Boleyn, Ambassador to Rome, escaping captive from a Spanish jail, inmate of the Tower for treason, dead of a fever incurred on royal charge; the other a tourneying blade, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, duelist, window-breaker, Lent-breaker, Field-Marshal in Flanders, be-

headed at last on Tower Hill on a mushroom charge—surely these had Norman quicksilver in their arteries. Sidney glittered out of the youngest conquering kindred; Spenser, with his immense chivalric allegory, hesitant within the ante-chamber of great events, was another. The mild afterglow of medievalism suffusing his writings showed a strain of the Anglo-Saxon as well. This was the preparatory period.

There came a writer whose Ariel and Oberon flitted in from Celtic bogs; whose weird sisters, driven leaders, and broken kings were of the unhappy land of Hengest and Horsa; whose Falstaff and Hal of Harfleur, Mercutio, and Petruchio, twinkled with the iridescence that gleamed over Hastings. Shakespeare we are used to calling universal; and in him these three strands were woven. There were great poets beside him, Webster and Ford who knew the frozen Norns, Marlowe, Jonson, and Fletcher with the flash of the Norman; but it was a noon in which the brightest stars paled. Of the courtly Gallic school were Campion and the silver-fluting Caroline poets, Herrick, Lovelace, Suckling, and their dulcet brotherhood. John Donne staggered beneath the task of welding the French artificiality to the gloom of the Teuton; and the eyeless vaunter of Satan's manhood had something of the same blend, although in this case the overnote was Anglo-Saxon: carefree contemplation in the suave young bucolics, grave and Puritanic reflection setting the key to the brave tales of Lucifer's lost battalion and Samson's destructive strength. After him for a long space the same contemplative strain persisted: now precious and stabbing, in the gardened landscapes of Dryden and Pope, milder and variously earnest in Thomson, Collins, Gray, and Cowper. Out of these came Wordsworth, great in his own right as a practitioner of

contemplation, and of further import to us for his copy-book rôle to many American poets.

Then came a burst of Celtic music, preluded by the sweet plow improvisions of Burns and the angel gossip of Blake. Coleridge walked in Xanadu, Shelley grew great wings, Keats moved in a thin Hellas through the moon-song of philomel. A lustier lower flight was not wanting; the Norman influence let down the drawbridge to Scott, Southey, and the great club-footed dandy who died for the living dregs of Greece. After these came the Victorians. Tennyson was predominantly Anglo-Saxon, with his gentle contemplation; although other strains were not wanting in his wide song. Browning wed the gusty Norman mood to a more than Norman vision. There was a swamplight of ecstasy in Rossetti, far-flung in Swinburne, darkly soaring in Francis Thompson; there was a cloistered contemplation in Matthew Arnold and William Morris. These were the outstanding figures.

The same division exists today, although ever the blending continues. Gentlest of all is the Celtic whimsey of de la Mare, of Hodgson, of Yeats; this mounted to a trumpet in Synge. There is less of the purely contemplative; although Davies has this in a diluted form, and Thomas Hardy with all the old somberness. It is in the Norman strain of vigor and gallantry that the chief singers exult: Noyes of the apt name; Kipling, a provincial of the sun-circled empire; Masefield, rounding the bitter Horn or riding to hounds. A prosier practitioner in the same mood, touched by the Anglo-Saxon, is W. W. Gibson. Housman, the Shropshire meadowlark, has all but the Celtic fantasy; and G. K. Chesterton, of the lost victory of Lepanto and the winning defeat of White Horse Vale, has in small the universality of all three strands. With these, the English tale may be broken off.

When Saxon and Norman moved into England, they bore in their respective memories their folk epics, Beowulf and the Song of Roland; it is probable that both were first fixed in writing in the newer homeland. England was for a long time a spiritual and artistic province of France, drinking at the same time also from the latter's cultural motherland, Italy; as Italy had borrowed from Greece. When the English colonists gripped from Kennebec to the Savannah River, they brought in their scant libraries, in similar fashion, Shakespeare and Milton. Flowing locks and clipped roundhead took their style from torn England; it is no wonder that the poets of the young land did the same. In 1623 the Reverend William Morrell composed in Latin a description of New England, returning a year later to the less rigorous homeland. In 1630 came the first verse by a northern colonist, who remains anonymous:

The place where we live is a wilderness wood,
Where grass is much wanting that's fruitful and good:
Our mountains and hills and our valleys below
Being commonly cover'd with ice and with snow:
And when the northwest wind with violence blows,
Then every man pulls his cap over his nose:
But if any's so hardy and will it withstand,
He forfeits a finger, a foot or a hand.

But when the spring opens, we then take the hoe,
And make the ground ready to plant and to sow;
Our corn being planted and seed being sown,
The worms destroy much before it is grown;
And when it is growing some spoil there is made
By birds and by squirrels that pluck up the blade;
And when it is come to full corn in the ear,
It is often destroy'd by raccoon and by deer. . . .

Now while some are going let others be coming,
For while liquor's boiling it must have a scumming;

But I will not blame them, for birds of a feather,
By seeking their fellows, are flocking together.
But you whom the Lord intends hither to bring,
Forsake not the honey for fear of the sting;
But bring both a quiet and contented mind,
And all needful blessings you surely will find.

In 1640, *The Psalms in Metre, faithfully Translated for the Use, Edification, and Comfort of the Saints, in Public and Private, especially in New England,* appeared in Cambridge—the first volume published in the new land. It had twenty-three editions among the home-brewed saints; who can say that this was undeserved, with its:

The rivers on of Babilon,
  There when wee did sit downe,
Yea, even then, wee mourned when
  Wee remembered Sion.

Our harp we did hang it amid,
  Upon the willow tree,
Because there they that us away
  Led in captivitee

Requir'd of us a song, and thus
  Askt mirth us waste who laid,
Sing us among a Sion's song,
  Unto us then they said.

All of these were out-puts of English verse; and from Mistress Anne Bradstreet, Urian Oakes, Cotton Mather, Phillis Wheatley, the Negro slave, with her gardened apostrophes:

Imagination! who can sing thy force?
Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?
Soaring through air to find the bright abode,
The empyreal palace of the thundering God,

> We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,
> And leave the rolling universe behind,
> From star to star the mental optics rove,
> Measure the skies, and range the realms above,
> There in one view we grasp the mighty whole,
> Or with new worlds amaze the unbounded soul.

from these first singings, through the leisurely trochees of Hiawatha down to verse as recent as "The Wine of Wizardry," the provincial attitude persists and controls. From Jamestown, however, to *Leaves of Grass* was only two hundred and fifty years. Nine hundred years elapsed between Hengest and Horsa, and *Piers Plowman*; three hundred, between Hastings and the *Canterbury Tales*. They had to build a language, we had to smooth a rugged continent. The wonder is rather that America has found its tongue so soon.

There was a group of Cavalier lyricists in the early South: Richard Henry Wilde, Edward Coate Pinckney, William Gilmore Simms, Philip Pendleton Cooke. These were worthy practitioners in the gay Norman mood. There was a wide sprinkling of versifiers in the North, often didactic, who had more the moralizing contemplation of the Anglo-Saxon. This latter strain won one of its victories in Cromwell's time; the sun-hearted Normans came in with the Restoration. Wherever these striving forces settled, the atmosphere spoke in the verse.

At last America sprouted its first imposing harvest, centered in New York and New England. The much-quoted dictum of Van Wyck Brooks will serve to introduce them. "What emotions pass through an hereditary American when he calls to mind the worthies who figured in that ubiquitous, long panelled group of 'Our Poets,' which occupied once so prominent a place in so many domestic interiors. 'Our Poets' were commonly six in

number, kindly, graybearded, or otherwise grizzled old men. One recalls a prevailing six, with variations. Sometimes a venerable historian was included, a novelist or so, and even Bayard Taylor. Nothing could make one feel so like a prodigal son as to look at that picture." [1] They were all old: and venerability is by no means a sterling mark on poetry. Poe died at forty; Lanier, at thirty-nine; none of the Southerners mentioned above reached sixty-five, and two died under thirty-five. We think of Whitman, Tennyson, Browning, Homer as old; of Shakespeare and Chaucer as middle-aged; of Keats, Shelley, Byron as dead before their summer. Nor did this antiquity publish faces plowed by the storms of living; there was no gravure by the lash of experience, the red scorpion of time. Amiable versifiers all: it is not for the amiable to find the cave and then the crest of Horeb, and hear in the hush the still small voice which is poetry. Let us see briefly what they did.

Closest to the heights came Emerson. A certain transcendental stuttering mars his best fragments. And his best was fragments. The Concord Hymn had its own filed young perfection: it is the craft of Pope in minim, or perhaps Gray with a flashing opening. He was strongest when most imbued with moral indignation:

> And what if Trade sow cities
> Like shells along the shore,
> And thatch with towns the prairie broad,
> With railways ironed o'er?
> They are but sailing foam-bells
> Along Thought's causing stream,
> And take their shape and sun-colour
> From him that sends the dream. . . .

[1] America's Coming of Age, by Van Wyck Brooks. (B. W. Huebsch.)

He serveth the servant,
The brave he loves amain;
He kills the cripple and the sick,
And straight begins again.
For gods delight in gods,
And thrust the weak aside;
To him who scorns their charities,
Their arms fly open wide.

Something of the Celt spoke in Brahma, and in the cryptic crispness of:

Line in nature is not found;
Unit and universe are round;
In vain produced, all rays return;
Evil will bless, and ice will burn.

Einstein was anticipated in the line before the last.

Who bides at home, nor looks abroad,
Carries the eagles, and masters the sword.

Contemplation too was his, both of man and man's mother:

The silent organ loudest chants
The master's requiem.

For Nature beats in perfect tune,
And rounds with rhyme her every rune,
Whether she works in land or sea,
Or hide underground her alchemy.
Thou canst not wave thy staff in air,
Or dip thy paddle in the lake,
But it carves the bow of beauty there,
And the ripples in rhymes the oar forsake.

He could pass from the mysticism of "History" to the bitter plaint that "things are in the saddle, and ride

mankind"; he sought "the light which eats the dark"; he knew that "Beauty is its own excuse for being." Here is the scattered stuff of poetry.

Bryant, who bettered Halleck, Drake, and Willis, wrote his best poem at eighteen. A hundred years later A. E. Housman knew no maturer wisdom, but found a deathless music that the New Yorker heard only in grandiloquent echoes. As a poet, Whittier was a hard-headed Quaker; his flight brushed the ground. Lowell glistened with a New England afterglow of Old England. Holmes was shapely in "The Chambered Nautilus"; but there was the "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality"; and the candle dulls when the incandescent shines. Longfellow is by all odds the popular one:

> Pleasant it was, when woods were green,
> And winds were soft and low,
> To lie amid some sylvan scene,
> Where, the long drooping boughs between,
> Shadows dark and sunlight sheen
> Alternate come and go.

This opens his "Prelude," which ends on the crest, "Look, then, into thine heart, and write!" This would be well enough, if the first sonnet in Sir Philip Sidney's "Astrophel and Stella" had not ended, " 'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'Look in thy heart, and write!' " This more than sincerest flattery of English verse was Longfellow's undoing. When he strayed into skin originality, as in the bumping Finnish rhythm of Hiawatha and the sleepy Greekish cadence of Evangeline and the "Courtship of Miles Standish," his music betrayed him, as polyrhythmic poetry or free verse has betrayed many a wordy latter-day singer. "The Skeleton in Armour," waiving the problem of origins, is a good ballad; but "The Lady of

Shalott" is a better. His persistent moral poems are pleasing; but there were Dryden and Pope, in shrewder, wider, more polished vein. Great poetry needs the baptism of fire and blood; trees were made to bear up poets, as did one dark tree on Calvary. All of this was *outre mer* to Longfellow. In the Anglo-Saxon stream of contemplation he was a gentle and adequate versifier. But America is not a gentle land, nor was her motherland a gentle mistress to her Holofernes world. It was a small gentility, a country squire gentility, not the embracing gentleness of the mother of the carpenter from Nazareth. It was typical of a land that divorced literature from reality; that meditated sampler mottoes, while it burned witches, harried escaping slaves, underwent the dreadful phlebotomy of the Civil War, and erected as its Tower of Babel the Standard Oil Company.

Down the subsequent line of American poetry the three English strains outcrop. Poe, Emily Dickinson, Rose O'Neill, Elinor Wylie, feel the Celtic possession; Sidney Lanier and Edna St. Vincent Millay blend this with the Norman zest; John Hall Wheelock welds it to the Anglo-Saxon contemplation. Whitman beheld, and shouted; Robinson, Frost, and Masters are among those who behold in bitterness of spirit. The poets of abounding gusto, showing the Norman mood, are pre-eminently Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, and other rebel spirits. We have as yet no genius so universal as Shakespeare in the large, or Chesterton in small; Whitman is our nearest approach. But we are a young land, and a singing land; and the Spring thaw is upon us.

CHAPTER II

Edgar Allan Poe: Kubla in Hell

Words are a halting medium at their best. They evoke better than they photograph. They cannot paint the glint of gold on one river ripple at sunset; they can at most touch again a dormant chord in memory, and revive a brief sweet echo of the gone glory. They wear a different face to every man: "Christ" was not the same to Renan as to Newman, not even the same to Newman as to Chesterton, to Billy Sunday, or to Francis Thompson. They cannot even describe their fellow-words adequately. The "unearthly melody" of Kubla Khan effects only in resurrecting the song to those who have encountered this unearthly melody here or elsewhere; the accuracy of the awakened image depends upon the store of memory. Words after all are names, and never pictures. By pronouncing his name, we can summon up the troubled spirit of Edgar Allan Poe from the vasty deep; but only to those who have encountered it. These will feel the happy holy dread, as the mournful beauty of his songs breathes out of the threefold circle within which he stands, fed upon the torturing fare of honey-dew and the milk of hell. It is enough to say, in mere description, that his bulk of poetry is less than that of any mentionable American poet: and that this feather bulk is far and away purer poetry than any, and higher than any but the eagle flight of Walt Whitman.

We can relish the great savor of "Summer is i-comen in," of "Beowulf," of "The Twa Sisters," and know nothing of their authors; we can drink from the spring of "Ode to a Grecian Urn," of "The Tempest," of "The Shropshire Lad," and rise refreshed, with small knowledge needed of what manner of men poured their full selves into these crest singings. But as the author's life is woven more and more as the explanation for the tune, the necessity for a picture of the singer grows. The poignancy of frigid "Samson Agonistes," of brave "The Soul's Errand," of "Sunrise," is multiplied by a vision of the racked men who wrote them. Most of all, when the life is needed as a key to unlock the poems, we must have an introductory vista of the author. Poe and his poetry are the man; his poems and Poe are the singing. The human background for high human singing is always helpful, and at times imperative.

John Poe, great-grandfather of the poet, married Jane McBride, near relative of an admiral noted in English naval history, and subsequently emigrated from Ireland to Maryland. This was about 1750; in the new land the emigrant worked as a day laborer. This left him little time to attempt to trace his ancestry to De la Poe, a Norman companion of the first William, or to German or Danish origins, as later admirers of the poet have sought to do: for all the evidence shows, he is no more kin to these than to the earlier poet, Li T'ai Po. A son of this day laborer, David Poe, graduated from the trade of wheelwright to the dignity of a dry goods merchant, and was Assistant Deputy Quartermaster for Baltimore during the Revolution. LaFayette, whom he aided during this time, called upon the widow of the "General" (Southern courtesy had promoted him to this rank), during his last visit to the States, to thank her for the services

rendered him by her husband. David Poe, son of the merchant-warrior, was bred to the law. In 1803 he left the office of an uncle in Augusta, Georgia, where he had been practicing, to join a company of actors then playing in Charleston. In January, 1806, he married a member of the troupe, a widow of English birth, Mrs. Elizabeth Hopkins, born Arnold. Three years later, the parents were regular members of a company playing at the Federal Street Theatre, in Boston; and here, on January 19th, Edgar Poe, a second son, was born. Within two years the family had completely disintegrated. The husband apparently deserted his wife, and died in Baltimore, an end hastened by a taint of alcoholism hereditary in the family; and within a month, after giving birth to a daughter, she also died. Of the three children, William, the eldest, went to live with his grandfather Poe, was wayward, was sent to sea to be reformed, and died on the threshold of manhood; Rosalie, the youngest, became mad; Edgar, leaving poverty and an occasional pacifier of bread steeped in gin, was adopted by John Allan, a well-to-do tobacco merchant of Scottish extraction living in Richmond, perhaps at the request of his wife, who was childless.

The boy's lineage spelt waywardness and artistic vagabondage; the Allan environment was far from being a curb. A precocious and lovely child, his parlor tricks, quoting rag-tags of dramatic poetry and drinking the healths of visitors, were emphasized. At the age of six, his foster-father moved to England, and entered the boy in the Manor House School, Stoke-Newington. Five years later, on his return to Richmond, the boy was placed in a Richmond academy. During this period he grew into an idolatrous and tempestuous affection for Mrs. Helen Stannard, mother of a schoolmate, who be-

came the confidant of his boyish ideals and sorrows. Soon thereafter she died; and night after night Poe skulked within the churchyard, lingering beside her tomb. It was to her that the deathless lyric "To Helen" was written. His later embroidery of premature burial and cerement converse must be traced in part to these morbid hours.

In 1826, at seventeen, he was sent to the University of Virginia. He had a passion for athletics, and swam on a hot day the six miles between Ludlum's wharf and Warwick. As a boy Coleridge swam across the New River fully dressed, and acquired therefrom a lifelong illness; Poe was spared this. He did well in his studies, became slightly addicted to drink, and incurred heavy gambling debts. Both of the last named were then Southern virtues. Poe's later name for over-drinking came from his inability to over-drink; one glass did more to him than a dozen to many a contemporary, whose name today is recorded as a mirror of sobriety. The gambling debts Mr. Allan refused to honor. Poe left home, with the avowed intention of joining the heroic efforts of the decadent Greeks against their Turkish oppressors. Legends of his European travels are not wanting, with an elaborate tale of difficulties in St. Petersburg, which required ministerial intervention. With some biographers, these give way to the simpler story that on May 26, 1827, he enlisted in Boston in the Army under the name of Edgar A. Perry, served two successful years, and earned a promotion to sergeant-major. In similar fashion Coleridge served in the Fifteenth Dragoons as Silas Tomkyn Comberbache. In May, 1829, Perry was discharged from the Army, by some arrangement, and a year later Poe's foster-father secured for the young man, "weary, worn, and discontented," an appointment to West Point. In 1827, at the mature crest of

eighteen, he had published in Boston *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Other Poems*; in 1829 a revised edition appeared. Poe may have accepted the discipline of the regular army; the more cramping, brass-button-mould regimen of the school for officers was unbearable, and, after an unenviable record, he effected his discharge through a bit of parade-ground braggadocio which is still traditional at the Point. He left after arranging for a third, a subscription edition of his poems, dedicated to the Cadets, which afforded much amusement to the superior minds of his classmates.

This caused a final break with Mr. Allan, a split accentuated by the fact that the man's wife had died two years before, and a subsequent marriage contracted, which was followed by children. In 1833, after an abortive plan to fight for Polish freedom, he went to live with Mrs. Clemm, a paternal aunt in Baltimore, who became thereafter his protector, and out of her poverty his partial support. After Mrs. Stannard's death he had become enamored of Sarah Elmira Royster, whom he met later in life and proposed to successfully shortly before his death. About 1829 he loved his cousin, Elizabeth Herring, and wrote several poems to her. Two or three years later he paid assidious court to Mary Devereaux, who jilted him after a year, causing him to horsewhip one of her relatives whom he blamed for her action.[1] In 1835 he married his cousin, Virginia Clemm, a lovely girl of fourteen. Seven years later, if Van Cleef is accurate, he besieged Miss Devereaux, now married and living in Jersey City, with his attentions. Albert Mordell builds up a strong case for identifying her with the heroine of "The Assignation," and with the object of the lines "To

[1] "Poe's Mary," by Augustus Van Cleef, in *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1889.

F——," which were first "To Mary," and later altered to apply to the poet Frances Sargent Osgood, whom Poe met in 1844; in similar vein he altered other verses to apply to successive fancies.[2] In 1833, needy and ill, he won a prize of one hundred dollars offered by the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* with his story "MS. Found in a Bottle," and also high honorable mention for other stories submitted with it, and for the stately poem "The Coliseum." With the introduction to publishers that this slight success gave him, he was employed thereafter in poorly-paid editorial capacities on various Richmond, Philadelphia, and New York magazines, almost to the time of his death. He created universally the impression of a quiet, magnetic gentleman, faithful to his work, except for incapacitations caused by a morbid flight into drink. He was a dipsomaniac Hamlet, rather than a Falstaff. His name is chiefly associated with the *Southern Literary Messenger* of Richmond, *Graham's Magazine* and *The Gentleman's Magazine* in Philadelphia, and the *Quarterly Review* and *The Mirror*, edited by N. P. Willis, in New York City. He was a diligent staff writer, turning out reviews, answers to correspondents, and solutions of cryptograms; each paper prospered during its connection with him. In 1841 his young wife, while singing, burst a blood vessel in her throat, and was at first given up for dead. She rallied, but the malady recurred repeatedly. This, his difficulty in finding a paying market, and the persistent dipsomania, manifested themselves in melancholia, which was as apt to strike him at the moment of success as when in disgrace with fortune. In 1846 the poet removed his failing wife to a

[2] The Erotic Motive in Literature, by Albert Mordell (N. Y., 1919).

cottage in Fordham, outside New York City; and here, in abject poverty, she died the following year.

Poe himself was not far from the end. During this period, he received insufficient returns for his weakening stories and brilliant lectures. After his wife's death he sought a second marriage in several quarters, without accomplishing it. In 1849, he left the boat in Baltimore during an indisposition. He was shanghaied, according to the most trustworthy account, by a gang of typical American political hoodlums, who used his drugged body as a repeater at the election booths throughout the city, and left him dying at the end of this manifestation of manhood's high right of suffrage—an enduring monument to the practice of our politics. The story of festering disaster is not quite over. Two days after his death, inspired perhaps by Horace Greeley, one Rufus W. Griswold, Poe's literary executor, whose right even to this title is regarded as cloudy, published an obituary notice which is a classic of mendacious mispraise. Its slow effect has been to rally, to the defense of the maligned son of the light that never was, his associates Willis, Graham, and the rest, and a host of later critics. Poe, cleared of the calumnies, remains the high artist; Griswold lives in the unenviable obloquy of a poison-penned calumniator of the great dead.

We are not concerned here with Poe's world-wide fame as chief innovator of the short story, which took such amazing root in the fertile soil of France, and later achieved wider commercialized development in the machine-made literature of these States; nor as the originator of detective fiction, with his M. Dupin as the prototype of an apparently endless file led by Sherlock

Holmes, Father Brown, and Craig Kennedy; nor as the possessor of a vein of pseudo-scientific richness which formed a model for Jules Verne, the younger H. G. Wells, and a world of lesser men. He is greatest as poet; and in this capacity we must see him.

The secure repute of Coleridge rests on one poem and two torsos: "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "Christabel," and "Kubla Khan." Yet these three, in their own marvelous right and their liberating influence on all subsequent English poetry, especially in the fluid shift of meter and the bright surrender of the reins to fantasy, entitle their author without serious dispute to ranking among the top flight. The secure repute of Poe rests upon hardly more than a dozen brief poems; and several of these, by the obviousness of their craftsmanship, are relegated to a secondary immortality. The earlier "To Helen," "The Conqueror Worm," "The Haunted Palace," "The City in the Sea," "To One in Paradise," eliding the last stanze—these earn what Kubla Khan owns, the accolade of melodious magic. "The Raven," "The Bells," "Ulalume," "Israfel," and in lesser vein "The Sleeper" are great, but retain that consciousness of artisanship which is a blemish. "The Coliseum" shows as apt a control of polished verse as a liberated Pope or Dryden could wish; but it is after all splendid eloquence rather than poetry. "To Science" is a polished and workmanlike sonnet, important but hardly great. With these the tale is almost done. The ending of "Annabel Lee" is marvelous; but the opening is bathetic. The unfinished "Al Aaraaf" has astounding beauty in spots; it is a youthful mate to Christabel, with much less sustained wonder than its English cousin. "Lenore" touches beauty, "Romance" ends strongly. The rest are in the main dull and worthless. There is as much dross

in his latest works as in his earliest. He was great only as the wind blew; he could not equalize his product at any period. Genuine inspiration is at best a balky steed.

At fourteen, the poet wrote this marvelously perfect love lyric, "To Helen":

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, wayworn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
To the grandeur that was Rome.

Lo! in yon brilliant window niche,
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy Land!

This has the magnificent irregularity of meter and music which marks all his greatest poems; it has the brilliant assonance *face, Greece;* it has the daring terminal use of *which* in the last stanza. One of Poe's constant characteristics appears in it: an appeal to the ear within, rather than the brain. The reason may with reason protest the Nicean barks, with the seacoast of Bohemia; it may demand the location of the perfumed sea: but that beauty-loving flower of man's body that we call the soul is satisfied. There is lucent certitude here, and not morbidity. The sublimation of the emotion lifts it sky-high above fleshly passion. The woman has become an enanimation of love itself. It has a young restraint to be ex-

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pected; it is the precious prelude to meeting, with the unuttered, almost undreamed overtone that the meeting comes. The lyrics of such a lesser singer as Housman may be as exquisitely shaped; but here there is a wideness, a universality, an inevitability of emotion and phrasing that lifts it forever above the lesser brood. The difference is intangible, but as definite as noon sunshine. As characteristic of his genius is the stately passion of "The City of the Dead":

> There shrines and palaces and towers
> (Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)
> Resemble nothing that is ours.
> Around, by lifting winds forgot,
> Resignedly beneath the sky
> The melancholy waters lie. . . .
>
> But lo, a stir is in the air!
> The wave—there is a movement there!
> As if the towers had thrust aside,
> In slightly sinking, the dull tide—
> As if their tops had feebly given
> A void within the filmy Heaven.
> The waves have now a redder glow—
> The hours are breathing faint and low—
> And when, amid no earthly moans,
> Down, down that town shall settle hence,
> Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
> Shall do it reverence.

The symbolic meaning of "The Haunted Palace," in which the abstract transition from sanity to madness is uttered with overwhelming skill and harmony, is comparatively obvious; here we have a kindred picture—a poetic version of "The Fall of the House of Usher," that majestic study of insanity—perhaps on the same theme. "The hours are breathing faint and low," an exquisite

line, points to the human significance rather definitely. Perhaps Poe saw himself in this dreadful city. There is a beauty as unearthly in the other poem, with its amazing broken music:

Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
On its roof did float and flow,
(This—all this—was in the olden
Time long ago). . . .

And travellers, now, within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows see
Vast forms, that move fantastically
To a discordant melody,
While, like a ghastly rapid river,
Through the pale door
A hideous throng rush out forever
And laugh—but smile no more.

Most searching of all is "The Conqueror Worm," where to his evocation of the elementals is added a clarity, a sanity of vista vision that is unbearable to feeble souls:

Lo! 'tis a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years;
An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
In veils, and drowned in tears,
Sit in a theatre, to see
A play of hopes and fears,
While the orchestra breathes fitfully
The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,
And hither and thither fly—
Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,
Flapping from out their Condor wings
Invisible Woe!

That motley drama—oh, be sure
It shall not be forgot!
With its Phantom chased for evermore,
By a crowd that seize it not,
Through a circle that ever returneth in
To the self-same spot,
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
And Horror the soul of the plot.

But see, amid the mimic rout
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And the angels sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm.
And the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.

There is no need for symbols here. The shuddering insistence of the sustained rhyme in each stanza is almost unbearable; the changes of time and mood show the craft of a master. The fifth of this great brotherhood is "To One in Paradise," with its same melancholy splendor:

But o'er the past
(Dim gulf!) my spirit hovering lies
Mute, motionless, aghast. . . .

"No more—no more—no more!—"
(Such language holds the solemn sea
To the sands upon the shore)
Shall bloom the thunder-blasted tree,
Or the stricken eagle soar.

It is notes like these that prove his fare of honey-dew. "The Bells," for all its skill, has a tinselly tinkle; "The Raven," for all its power, and its freedom from that monotony that mars Swinburne's best poems, has spots that sag in a way that the best of Keats and Shelley does not, and as "The Ancient Mariner" hardly does. "Israfel" has an offensive twitter at times. In their own way, "The Coliseum" and "To Science" are flawless; but they are more the height of contemplation than the midland even of ecstasy. "Ulalume" has a patched rapture, and "Annabel Lee" is inevitable only at its end. A small total —but so close to the sun, that its vast shadow dims an endless logorrhea of Thanatopses, Hiawathas, Sir Launfals, and their diluted kindred.

Poe is at great pains, in "The Philosophy of Composition," to give the successive mechanical steps by which he engineered his most popular poem, "The Raven." Let us not forget that he was an energetic journalistic hoaxer, with "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," the "Balloon Hoax," the "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," and other Barnum marvels. "The Philosophy of Composition" is perhaps his most successful hoax—one not admitted by the author, and wholly or partly accepted by subsequent critics; but it bears the internal earmarks of its *ex post facto* reasoning.

To recall briefly its contents, Poe elaborated therein how "The Raven" was constructed "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." He decided mechanically it must be about one hundred lines long; its theme must be Beauty, its tone sadness, its technique must contain a refrain, which logically evolved into the word "Nevermore"; to secure variety, by devious reasoning the raven is selected as the spokesman; its

topic, the death of a beautiful woman, and the lover's consequent lament. "My first object (as usual) was originality . . . Nothing even remotely approaching this combination (into stanzas) has ever been attempted."

Thus far, Poe.

In 1842, Dr. T. Holley Chivers wrote a poem "To Allegra Florence in Heaven." In 1845 this was included in his volume, *The Lost Pleiad and Other Poems,* with each poem dated—the dates ranging from 1836 to 1844. Poe reviewed this volume in the *Broadway Journal* in 1845, months before his editorial connection with that periodical. Poe was always quick to nail plagiarism; one of his essays is entitled "Mr. Longfellow and Other Plagiarists," in which he accuses the gentle New Englander of stealing from his own "Politian." What did he say about Chivers, in this review?

> Is it not indeed a miracle that today a poet shall compose sixty or seventy poems in which there shall be discoverable no taint—absolutely none—of either Byron or Shelley, of Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Tennyson. In a word, the volume before us is the work of that *rara avis,* an educated, passionate, yet unaffectedly single-minded and single-hearted man, writing from his own vigorous impulses—from the necessity of giving utterance to poetic passion—and thus writing not to mankind but solely to himself. The whole volume has in fact the air of rapt soliloquy.[1]

Dr. Richardson quoted the following from "To Allegra Florence in Heaven":

> Holy angels now are bending to receive thy soul ascending
> Up to heaven to joys unending and to bliss which is divine,
> While thy pale, cold form is fading under Death's dark wings now shading

[1] "Who Was Chivers?" A Review of the Poe-Chivers Controversy. By Warfield Creath Richardson. Boston *Transcript,* April 24, 1897.

Thee with gloom which is pervading this poor broken
heart of mine.
And as God doth lift thy spirit up to heaven, there to inherit
Those rewards which it doth merit such as none have
reached before,
Thy dear father will tomorrow lay thy body with deep
sorrow
In the grave which is so narrow, there to rest forever-
more.

In "Lament on the Death of My Mother," written in July, 1839, Chivers uses the refrain "Nevermore"; in "The Lost Pleiad" we have these good lines:

Because of thine untimely fate
Am I left thus disconsolate,
Because thou wilt return to be
No more in this dark world with me,
Must these soft tears of sorrow flow
Out of my heart forevermore—
Forevermore as they do now—
Out of my heart forevermore.

This is not yet Poe; but it has a similar mood in diluted form, a variant of the "Raven" refrain—and it preceded "The Raven." "Lines to Isadore," written in 1841, stress the same *-ore* concluding rhyme as a refrain, and are akin to the second great stanza in the Poe poem commencing, " 'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!' " More than this, the "Mother's Lament" by Chivers, written in 1841, has a tolling, tolling, rolling, rolling stretch which is kin to Poe's 1849 "The Bells." There are other resemblances. "The Raven," according to Poe, was written in 1844; it was published first in 1845, the year of Poe's wholesale tribute to Chivers' volume, with its insistence that there is no slightest imitation in the book.

Here we have as strong a case for indictment of literary borrowing as Poe could ordinarily find against Longfellow—a borrowing of metric and verbal mechanism: and these are of the essence of Poe's enduring charm. The stanza of "The Raven" is an improvement on the Chivers stanza; but the first four lines are identical; and the suggestion for the refrain occurs repeatedly in Chivers. Chivers was a ninth- or tenth-rate versifier, at best; his poems deservedly have died. But they were the soil out of which "The Raven" grew; and if the composition of the latter poem, in 1844, had been independent of Chivers, when Poe came to review the latter's volume the next year, his acidulous tongue would either have made an outright charge of plagiarism, or would, in a calmer moment, have marveled at the similarity. Some sixty out of Chivers' seventy poems had previously seen periodical publication; which makes it much more probable to conclude that Poe understood what he took. This all contributes to the belief that "The Philosophy of Composition," the alleged story of the manufacture of "The Raven," is Poe's most successful hoax.

There was little sin, if any, in the borrowing. It is a characteristic of great poets to borrow liberally the lead, and utter it as gold. But such an advertisement of originality as Poe gave his "The Raven" is unusual; and the whole lends unique interest to *The Lost Pleiad and Other Poems,* and its verbose and often anticky author Chivers. It may offer some explanation of Poe's strictures on others, in an "Agen-bite of Inwit," based upon his own practices.

In one of those bursts of vision that make *The Way of All Flesh* the most nourishing of English novels, Samuel Butler says:

> A man should not only have his own way as far as possible, but he should consort only with things that are getting their own way so far that they are at any rate comfortable. Unless for short times under exceptional circumstances, he should not even see things that have been stunted or starved, much less should he eat meat that has been vexed by having been overdriven or under-fed, or afflicted with any disease; nor should he touch vegetables that have not been well grown.

There is a contagion bred of chumming with a crippled dog or cat, as of growing too intimate with a hump-backed tree or a club-footed radish. This might be held to justify abandoning Poe at this point, and not seeking further interpretation of the origin of these songs and stories of undoubted genius, based upon a study of the troubled life of their creator. Yet there is a tarn-bred health in his product; water-lilies and golden willows grow in the muck of the swamp. Consider your admitted successes:

> Deacons in their churches,
> Steering godly crafts,
> Then from lofty perches
> Blessing checks and drafts;

Observe lesser successes, always able to butter their bread, and swagger into their Rotary Clubs or union meetings; and you will find more spiritual warpings and mental goiters than Poe had. In much Poe had his own way; he was comfortable at least in contemplating his songs and tales. There is no miasma in living a further space with them.

In his *Psychopathic Study of Poe,* Dr. John W. Robertson makes out a persuasive plea that the poet was a victim of "dipsomania, necessarily . . . an alcoholic inheritance. It is characterized by periodical seizures in which the subject, because of changed personality, is temporarily irresponsible, and cannot, at all times, be held accountable for his behavior." The known facts of the poet's life are oriented to this theory with some skill, to form a dark seamless cloak. But this study by a doctor deals, as was to have been expected, with the external Poe—the garment of tainted flesh; the spirit of fitful light dwelling within it is not a fit theme for medical weighing. Grant the case, that he was a dipsomaniac, that the seizures date from his twenties or earlier, that they increased as he grew older and incapacitated him during the last four years, that they are explanation, complete or partial, for his melancholia, his late love attachments, his drinking, and his death, and we still know the veriest fraction of what is important about the poet. When Dr. Robertson essays the alien field of literary criticism, he is not happy, whether in his slur at Emerson's poetry, his acceptance of Stedman's absurd dictum that the wishy-washy "For Annie" is Poe's finest poem, or in his inability to comprehend Poe's "Eureka." The book is helpful, but very limited; on two of the crucial points, the shadowy figure of the mad sister, Rosalie Poe, and the explanation of the marriage to fourteen-year-old Virginia Clemm, he is ruinously casual. We must look beneath this superficial physical study for some explanation of the thing that Poe constantly sought to say in his work, based upon some abiding inner causation. The condition of the body may cause fantasies, but need not control the form they take. An unwise late supper may result in an uneasy night of dreaming; but the ex-

planation of the specific message of the dreams lies deeper. Works of art, it should be remembered, are kin to dreams in their revelation of the inner craving of the spirit; and it is this craving which motivates, directly or cloudily, the outer life.

We may dismiss "The Literati" and other critical papers, as being objective in their main stimulus. The pseudo-scientific hoaxes, the ratiocinative stories, the stories of nature's marvels, the general of the treatment of death, the humorous trifles, yield something; but there is a nearer, richer vein. "The Cask of Amontillado" may be a wish fulfilment of the outcome of his dislike of Thomas Dunn English, as has been suggested; and "William Wilson" certainly pictures Poe's childhood, and is a plausible brief for the case that he himself aided chance in his early card-playing. It is in the nine love stories, "The Colloquy of Monas and Una," and the poems, that we will locate the chief assistance.

"With me poetry has been not a purpose, but a passion," Poe wrote, in his introduction to the 1845 volume of his poems. It was a passion that apparently he could not feign. It is significant that three of his five greatest poems are embodied in three of these short stories: "The Haunted Palace" in "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Conqueror Worm" in "Ligeia," and "To One in Paradise" in "The Assignation." One or more of these poems intrinsically belong with the stories; it was as if, in the midst of the emotional tension of prose construction, his feeling surged to a point where it broke into metric utterance. The poetry was the deepest self speaking: perhaps this prose has something of the same verity.

Let us briefly recapitulate certain salient external facts. Poe's mother died when he was two; he had a strong

affection for his foster-mother, Mrs. Allan; he had a distinct passion for the mother of a playmate, Mrs. Stannard; he had a life-long affection for Mrs. Clemm, the mother of his wife; he wooed later other matured women. He was separated from his sister, Rosalie, who subsequently went mad, and may have outlived him. "The Haunted Palace," a poem themed on madness, and "The Fall of the House of Usher," a story of brother and sister (Roderick and Madeline Usher), last of their family, ending with the premature burial of the sister and the death of both—these are treatments of madness. Consider the name chain: Rosalie—Eulalie—Ulalume (the latter bringing in "Psyche, dear sister," presumably his soul; and "Psyche" had been his term addressed in "To Helen" to Mrs. Stannard; while Ulalume is the buried dear one). Consider too how many of his favorite women's names have the syllable *-lie* (as in Rosalie) in some form: Leonora, Ligeia, Eulalie, Annabel Lee, Lenore. He may consciously have chosen this for the musical sound; but the unconscious may have played its part. His sister Rosalie went mad; this is a sort of premature death and untimely burial. His mother's early death, followed by the death of Mrs. Stannard, and his midnight vigils at her tomb, accentuated the growth of the same morbid fantasies. Thus he lost, among women signifying his mother, his real mother, Mrs. Stannard, Mrs. Allan, all before twenty; he lost, to all intents, his sister, Sarah Royster, Elizabeth Herring, Mary Devereaux, before he was twenty-three. The death of his wife occurred too late to be the explanation; even her imagined death, when she first broke the blood vessel, came after most of the premature burial and love entanglement stories had been completed. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," it is the sister rela-

tionship, plus madness; in "Ligeia," it is the substitution of the dead former love (a compound of Rosalie and perhaps Mary Devereaux) for the second wife, who may have been Virginia, or some predecessor of hers; in "Morella," another early story, it is the mother Morella substituting herself for the daughter Morella. In "Eleonora" the former love (more clearly Mary Devereaux this time, although called a cousin) gives her consent to the marriage to the late Ermentrude; as if this were conscious or subconscious propaganda, in which his soul approved or tried to approve some substitution for the lost former one. "The Assignation," with the poem to the dead sweetheart, "To One in Paradise," points even more clearly to Mary Devereaux, who was now married to another. In "Berenice" he marries his cousin, and sadistically takes from her dead body the white teeth that so obsessed him. Last of all, in the half-humorous "The Spectacles," he thinks he has married his great-great-grandmother!—mad, whimsical ridicule bubbling up from the unconscious. These stories are, with two exceptions, placed in the first person. It is impossible to believe that their repeated themes are insignificant; it is inevitable to look within them for Poe's own inner story.

In this tangle lies something of the explanation of Poe's melancholia, and his driven nature which kept him unhappy, and at last wrecked him. The evidence points to a mother fixation or complex, an over-attachment to his mother, and to later substitutes for her, in four or more women older than himself; and also to a lesser, cloudier erotic affection for his sister, who went mad, and was succeeded by a succession of cousins and other young women, who took her place in his fancy. One of them, Mary Devereaux, apparently embodied his strongest emotion; and she too was denied him. In both these

fixations, the near relationship produced the inhibition preventing successful suit, and an imperative to search continually until he found in some love object the mother, or the sister. This is one of man's impossible searches: and when superimposed upon a descent from wayward, artistically vagabonding forebears, and an inherited alcoholism, the chance for successful integration of life is slim indeed. In every case he either threw up a defense mechanism which broke off the incipient affair, or carried it through, as in his marriage to Virginia, and found in it no satisfaction of his deepest need. Either way was torture: and out of this twisting of soul, in its extended agony, came the deathless music.

Let it be clearly understood that this is by way of explanation, and not at all by way of condemnation. It is easy for lowland-minded conventionalists to find moral lessons in this, and impute, as Lowell did, a lack of character to the poet. So a race of drab tan moths might indict and convict a moth that dared to have wings of lustrous black, with scarlet characters marked on them. Compare, if you will, the characters and the products of such a blameless mediocrity as Whittier, and of this pilloried songster: it is a question if in every way Poe was not more helpful to the race than the anti-slavery bard. Poe did not create himself: he was not given the choice between being a Coleridge, and an inoffensive Bryant. If he had had the choice, it would have been better for us if he had chosen his own dark way. But the choice is never given. He was as he was played upon; and his scant high singing is our resultant heritage.

CHAPTER III

Walt Whitman: a Mystic Volcano

If a group of men were suddenly blown to the moon, and one was a poet, he might conceivably sing exquisite home songs of mother earth; but this would make more of an introduction than a foundation for the poetry of the subsequent moon-dwellers. Poe, first in time of the chief poets of America, is least American of all in his singing. Hardly one of his worthy lines has a habitation and a name local to America: his verses move in a fantastic domain east of the Italian sun and west of the medieval moon. If it is urged that Bryant walked in moralizing awe through his own tamed forests, that Whittier chirped of homeland snows, that Emerson uttered half-wild native woodnotes, that Longfellow turned his mellow-tinted European spectacles upon themes of our own history, that Lowell shook a wicked Yankee twang in the Biglow Papers, it still remains that their contact with America was in the main that of cultured bookmen, who traveled little in their own country, and studiously stood within their own social class; at most in Whittier seeking to elevate the vulgar into the sacrosanct circle of traditional culture. There was need for a poet who walked the sweating laboring soil of America, out of which her pallid pillars of borrowed culture rose: and Walt Whitman came.

Thin tradition connects the poet's stock with Zechariah

Whitman, a ruling elder and ordained teacher who emigrated from England in 1635, and lived in New Haven and Milford, leaving no issue. It is more certain that Joseph Whitman, who was admitted freeman of Connecticut from Huntingdon in 1664, was an ancestor in the direct line. Constable, grand juryman, leather-sealer, surveyor, owner of several farms, shrewd trader in land, he lived at least down to 1698. One among his descendants moved to a farm in the West Hills to the south; and his son Nehemiah was the father of Jesse Whitman, who was Walt Whitman's grandfather. The men of the family grew into a quiet and stalwart independence; the women were strong-minded pioneer mothers, who smoked their pipes, and, when emergency required, directed the slave-tilled farms from the saddle. Jesse Whitman married Hannah Brush, a schoolmistress; his son, Walt's father, married Louisa Van Velsor, daughter of a worthy Dutch farmer, with Quaker affiliations. This father passed his childhood on the farm at West Hills, and as a boy was apprenticed to a carpenter in New York. Large, quiet, serious, he could not have had great understanding of the second boy, Walt, born May 31, 1819. His sturdy acceptance of America may be found in the fact that three of his nine children were named Andrew Jackson Whitman, George Washington Whitman, and Thomas Jefferson Whitman.

The family moved to Brooklyn when Walt was four; but much of his childhood was spent with his farming grandparents. He attended the public schools; served, at twelve, as errand boy in a lawyer's office; and went to work, two years later, on the return of his family to the country, as printer's apprentice on the *Long Island Patriot* and later, the *Long Island Star*. Youthful effusions appeared in the former and in the New York

Mirror. At the age of seventeen he taught country school at Babylon, on the south shore of Long Island. The next year he attempted his own paper, *The Long Islander,* but soon wandered back into teaching. He was a vocal member of debating societies, and put out shoots as abolitionist, teetotaler, and as an opponent of capital punishment. After further journalistic apprenticeship, at the age of twenty-seven he was appointed editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* which gave him a wider forum for his views on slavery and free soil. In 1848 he slipped out of this, and on a whim accepted a post with the embryo New Orleans *Crescent,* taking on his leisurely southern jaunt his brother Jeff, then fifteen. After two months, he and the homesick brother started north again; and at the end of a silent period we see him starting the *Daily Freeman* in 1850 in Brooklyn, as a home for his reforming views. During these years he published eighteen short stories, in a vein of moral melodrama; there is no hint of the genius of Poe in these efforts. In 1842 his novel, "Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate," had been issued, and sold well—a plea for total abstinence, during the composition of which the poet later confessed that he refreshed himself with gin cocktails. Eight of his verses appeared during this period, holding at best slim promise of his future development. He associated himself with his father as carpenter and builder, which promised financial success. In 1855, at about the time of the latter's death, he abandoned this work, and in the summer of that year published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass.*

Emerson was one who saw the vast merit and promise of this work; Whitman, in three unsigned reviews of his own book, was one of the few others. The next June appeared an enlarged and improved edition of the volume, with a sentence from Emerson on the cover, and the

whole letter included in an appendix. This, with little reason, offended the philosopher of Concord. In 1860 a Boston firm reprinted the book, with further additions. In 1862, roused by the wounding of his brother at the battle of Fredricksburg, Whitman went to Washington, and put in three years as "the wound-dresser," composing "Drum Taps," and, in 1865, the magnificent Lincoln elegies. That year he secured a minor position in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior. His Puritanic superior, upon encountering the proofs of a new edition of the *Leaves* in the poet's desk, summarily removed him, on the ground that the proofs contained indecent passages. Whitman, by an admirer's intervention, was transferred to the department of the Attorney-General; but an impetuous friend, in a vehement pamphlet, made the facts known, and saddled upon the poet's name the overtone of kinship to decadent embroiderers of sexual themes.

The poet never married; but in a late letter to John Addington Symonds he stated,

> My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc., have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Tho' unmarried, I have had six children—two are dead—one living Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes me occasionally—circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations.

In his later life, Whitman was averse to mentioning the subject, even to his intimate friends; and the known facts point to a few continuing relationships, rather than promiscuity.

In June, 1872, originating perhaps in a student joke, the United Literary Societies of Dartmouth College invited the poet to deliver the Commencement Poem; they

were surprised to listen to the dignified "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free." From 1869 on his health was not good; and in 1873 he suffered a paralytic stroke, which partially incapacitated him thereafter. This may have been an unconscious flight from further conflict with the harshness of material life, while still leaving him free to serve his singing. With sufficient care from loving friends, he spent the rest of his life in Camden, New Jersey, where his brother George lived—a stay broken by occasional visits to New York and Philadelphia. Constant revisions of *Leaves of Grass* came from the press, together with many brief collections of later verse and prose. To the end he fought the fight largely alone. A year before his death he could write, "I have been and am rejected by all the great magazines."

On March 26, 1892, he died.

During his life critical appreciation had not been lacking from a few in America, and from a larger number in England. But it is only in the last decade that the ramparts of academic exclusiveness have crumbled: today finds him securely established as the leading poetic voice of America.

Whitman's greatness as poet rests upon peak moments of lyric intensity and beauty, upon constant fragments of exquisite phrasing gemming most of his verses, and upon the liberating sweep of his vision and method. For sheer ecstasy there are passages in his earliest work like this:

Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid grey of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.

At times this ecstasy suffuses a whole poem, as in "On the Beach at Night," the great Lincoln threnody "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," and most of all "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Here we have a rhapsody as genuine and as shaped as any of the great odes of the English Romantic school, and with much greater freshness of technique. This magnificent childhood memory of the two feathered guests from Alabama, the lament of the male bird at the death of his mate, and the splendid apostrophe to death at the conclusion, has a width of gesture that Poe could not achieve, and lyric heights he could not better:

Shine! shine! shine!
Pour down your warmth, great sun!
While we bask, we two together.

Two together!
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together.

His very titles are often daring poems: "In Cabin'd Ships at Sea," "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd,"

"Not Heaving from My Ribb'd Breast Only," "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," "Song of the Open Road," "A Song of the Rolling Earth," "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "Song for All Seas, All Ships," "Rise, O Days, from Your Fathomless Depths," "By the Bivouac's Fitful Flame," "Years That Trembled and Reel'd Beneath Me," "Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice," "This Dust Was Once the Man," "By Blue Ontario's Shore"—in these and many others his unquestioned poetic genius shone in title as well as in content. The Lincoln ode is full of individual beauties, in the midst of its mighty surge:

With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and the unbared heads.

With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent, sinking sun, burning, expanding the air.

In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a wind-dapple here and there.

The sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

The huge and thoughtful night.

It is impossible to do more than pick a few of these lines of exquisite beauty from varied sources:

The faint creaking of the cordage, the melancholy rhythm,

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept with a carpenter's compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlecue cut with a burnt stick at night.

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars, . . .
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlours of heaven.

Old age superbly rising! O welcome, ineffable grace of dying days!

No poem proud, I chanting bring to thee, nor mastery's rapturous verse,
But a cluster containing night's darkness and blood-dripping wounds,
And psalms of the dead.

There are two sustained flights which outsoar any that have been mentioned, in their prophetic anticipation of later discoveries of science, and their poetic vista of the unrolling universe. These are the portions of the vast chaos of "Song of Myself" commencing,

I am an acme of things accomplished, and an encloser of things to be

with the magnificent figure:

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen;

and the one beginning:

I open my scuttle at night, and see the far-sprinkled systems.

In more formal meter, the opening of "Song of the Broad-Axe" has all of Browning's vigor, and an impelling beauty. In similar form, although unrhymed, is "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!"

Joy! shipmate—joy!
(Pleased to my Soul at death I cry;)
Our life is closed—our life begins;
The long, long anchorage we leave,
The ship is clear at last—she leaps!
She swiftly courses from the shore;
Joy! shipmate—joy!

The quality which makes *The Way of All Flesh* more than an enduring novel—the constant felicities of chiseled thought that lift it—is one of the treasures of Whitman. The book is saturated with a philosophy of which only a few fragments can be given:

To the States or any one of them, or any city of the States,
Resist much, obey little.

See, projected through time,
For me an audience interminable.

I loaf and invite my soul.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.

All the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers.

To die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

I do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else.

I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons.

I do not snivel the world over
That months are vacuums and the ground but wallow and filth.

I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.

I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.

Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give I give myself.

Neither a master nor a servant I. . . .
I will be even with you and you shall be even with me.

Strange and hard that paradox true I give,
Objects gross and the unseen soul are one.

Not a grave of the murder'd for freedom but grows seed
for freedom, in its turn to bear seed,
Which the winds carry afar and re-sow, and the rains and
the snows nourish.

O days of the future I believe in you—I isolate myself for
your sake,
O America, because you build for mankind I build for you,
O well-beloved stone-cutters, I lead them who plan with
decision and science,
Lead the present with friendly hand toward the future.

He foresaw an ample democracy embracing all men and all women; he denied that evil existed, perhaps because it is a false vision of unseen good; his terms of discipleship involved bitterness and suffering. He is hardly ever the dramatic poet, only briefly the narrative: he is all lyric, with his great ungainly beautiful lines. We have had no such rolling plateaus of lyric counsel, self-explanation, unhedged outward vision, in the history of English verse. To find his fellow, we must travel further: and it may be that our search will not end until we stand beside a fair-haired shepherd king, and that more shadowy figure who let the heavens speak in the Book of Job.

Whitman's literary criticism is needed tonic for America, as in "Song of the Exposition":

Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia,
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas',
Odysseus' wanderings,

Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus,
Repeat at Jerusalem, place the notice high on Jaffa's gate and on Mount Moriah,
The same on the walls of your German, French, and Spanish castles, and Italian collections,
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you.

There is a large healthy irony in all this. Even more direct is "By Blue Ontario's Shore":

Rhymes and rhymers pass away, poems distill'd from poems pass away,
The swarms of reflectors and the polite pass, and leave ashes,
Admirers, importers, obedient persons, make but the soil of literature,
America justifies itself, give it time, no disguises can deceive it or conceal from it, it is impassive enough,
Only toward the likes of itself will it advance to meet them,
If its poets appear it will in due time advance to meet them, there is no fear of mistake,
(The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it.)

He masters whose spirit masters, he tastes sweetest who results sweetest in the long run,
The blood of the brawn beloved of time is unconstraint.

From Whitman's collected prose, we can get an amplification of his judgment upon prior literatures, and his motive and purpose in *Leaves of Grass*. He addresses former masters in art:

Ye powerful and resplendent ones! ye were, in your atmospheres, grown not for America, but rather for her foes, the feudal and the old—while our genius is democratic and modern.

America, he says,

> must, for her purposes, cease to recognize a theory of character grown of feudal aristocracies, or formed by merely literary standards, or from any ultramarine full-dress formulas of culture, polish, caste, etc., and must sternly promulgate her own new standards, yet old enough, and accepting the old, the perennial elements, and combining them into groups, unities, appropriate to the modern, the democratic, the west, and to the practical occasions and needs of our own cities, and of the agricultural regions.

This is more typical than the first quotation of the grotesque verbal mishmash that is his prose. It is obvious that this will not explain, in its construction, his arrival at that many-rhythmed or polyrhythmic line which is typical of his best work. It was not prepared for in his earlier prose, nor clearly in his early verse. It is a blind alley that leads toward the majestic parallelism of Hebrew verse, and toward prior English experimentation, as in the versions of Ossian current, and the rhapsodies of Blake. The former he knew, and undoubtedly the Biblical rhythms were an assistance; there is no suggestion that he was familiar with the latter. Whitman was never a bookish man, despite his frequent mention of Shakespeare; his education had been to a high degree scrappy. He gives us no aid in his reminiscences, except the negative memorandum, "I had great trouble in leaving out the stock 'poetical' touches, but succeeded at last." Again he writes, "I have not only not bother'd much about style, form, art, etc., but confess to more or less apathy (I believe I have sometimes caught myself in decided aversion) toward them throughout, asking nothing of them but negative advantages—that they should never impede me, and never under any circum-

stances, or for their own purposes only, assume any mastery over me." Do not take from this the impression that he was a slovenly workman; the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass* were successive improvements, as when he swung from the earlier music of

Out of the rock'd cradle

into the vastly richer opening melody:

Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking.

To return to the problem of the development of his technique, Carpenter [1] has gone furthest in deriving the form, among the many commentators upon the theme. "Whitman's verse method," he concludes, "grew out of his own impassioned speech." He quotes from a lecture delivered on March 31, 1851, by Whitman, before the Brooklyn Art Union, whose two moods are:

In Naples, in Rome, in Venice, that ardor for liberty which is a constituent part of all well-developed artists and without which a man cannot be such, has had a struggle—a hot and baffled one. The inexplicable destinies have shaped it so. The dead lie in their graves; but their august and beautiful enthusiasm is not dead:

Not a grave of these slaughtered ones
But is growing its seed of freedom,
In its turn to bear seed,
Which the wind shall carry afar and re-sow,
And the rain nourish,
Not a disembodied spirit
Can the weapons of tyrants let loose
But it shall stalk invisibly over the earth
Whispering, counselling, cautioning.

[1] Walt Whitman. By George R. Carpenter (New York, 1909).

In four of these nine lines, not a word is changed in the present appearance in "Europe: The 72nd and 73rd Years of These States." But the nine lines have been set up as four—not shortened, but altered in appearance; and the original line division is the more inevitable and logical, where each line marks the point of the reader's breathing, when it is rendered aloud. In any case, we have here the clear germ of the form. Whitman's prose style of formal address, given here, differs sharply from his prose style for reading only, previously quoted. During the formative period preceding the first issuance of *Leaves of Grass,* the poet was undetermined whether to impart his message by speech or poetry. His brother George later recalled that the poet wrote "barrels" of lectures during this time, which existed in the form of a multitude of notes, outlines, and short passages, some of which have been published by his literary executors. His new form, says Carpenter, was "living, musical, rhythmical, impassioned speech." Prose may be living, musical, impassioned, and must be rhythmical. This new form was not prose, but poetry, with its definite tendency toward unity of rhythm: a wide unity, an upward tendency, a downward tendency, a rolling tendency perhaps; but always a basic unity. By his ultimate decision in favor of poetry, we may have lost an Ingersoll; but we have gained more.

The genesis of poetry lies in emotional utterance at a high tension, and is rooted in the spoken word. As the emotion grows, the tendency toward rhythmical repetition increases. Impassioned oratory has its sweeping curves of rhythm. As these grow short and shorter with the mounting passion, we pass the borderland, and at length are in unquestioned verse. Whitman's best poetry lies above the multiplicity of rhythm of prose, and below

the formal regularity of lockstep verse. It is only in an almost inconceivable case that high emotion naturally clothes itself in a stretch of successive iambs or trochees, with no break; oftener we have verse which can be stretched into iambic or trochaic by academic professors of metrics, but which in reality is much freer. Take a typical case—the best-known soliloquy in Hamlet. Logically divided, the feet would be:

> To be/or not to be/that/is the question.
> Whether/'tis nobler/in the mind/to suffer
> The slings/and arrows/of outrageous/fortune
> Or/to take arms/against/a sea/of troubles
> And/by opposing/end them.

You may disagree with my division of the second foot of the first line, and my not breaking *outrageous;* with these exceptions—and in them I think I correctly render the music—there can be no criticism of this division. The first three lines, thus rendered, are tetrameters, not pentameters. The uniformity comes in the standard eleven syllables in each of the first four lines. In logical division into feet, we have here four iambs, three trochees, three amphibrachs, two anapests, and several less usual feet. Apply the same principle to the first quotation from Whitman herein:

> Press close/bare-bosom'd/night/press close/magnetic/nourishing/night
> Night/of south winds/night/of the few/large stars!
> Still nodding/night/mad/naked/summer/night.
> Smile/O voluptuous/cool-breath'd/earth!
> Earth/of the slumbering/and liquid/trees.

Here there is more temptation than in the Shakespeare quotation to divide words. Without further division—

and this is the logical oral rendition—we have three spondees, four amphibrachs, one anapest, one dactyl, one iamb, two trochees, eleven single syllable feet (where a pause gives the effect of a full foot), and several other feet. Take a typical stanza from Poe:

> Out out/are the lights/out all!
> And over/each quivering/form
> The curtain/a fu-/neral pall
> Comes down/with the rush/of a storm.

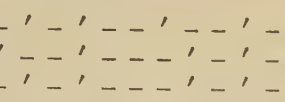
You may insist upon dividing *quivering* and *curtain* to suit your conception of meter; but the uttered poem does not. And that, after all, is the final accurate test. Without the division, we have here three spondees, four anapests, two amphibrachs, and three irregular feet. Contrast with all these:

> The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
> The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,
> The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
> And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

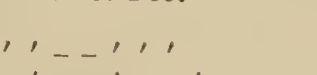
Each line is complete, of the same number of syllables, of the same regular alternation of syllables; it may be classified as of the same monotonous iambic feet. There is an irritating sameness, no matter the content; the greater craftsmanship knows the artistic value of the discord, the break; the greatest poetry always shows these. On that perilous ledge, above prose on the one side and above the level stretch of goose-step verse on the other, lies the rhythm in which the greatest poetry instinctively clothes itself. Whitman at his best inhabited here.

Another test, ignoring division into feet, and showing merely the succession of short or unaccented syllables

(-) and accented or long syllables (′) would give a similar result. Take the quotation from Hamlet:



This is the accent scheme of the first three lines; properly read, each has only four accents—the conclusion we arrived at before. Now for Poe:



Here we have more regularity, except for the first line: and his musical ear taught him that the spondee (′ ′) was the exact equivalent of the anapest (- - ′); which hardly jars as substitute for the opening iamb. And here is the Whitman opening:

This shows how varied the apparent scheme may be, and still make exquisite music: read the lines over, to be sure of this. While here is Gray:

Whitman was an uneducated man; and he considered, among other names, "Autochthons" as a name for his prose miscellany. He ran to unassimilated verbal importations, to flaunt a learning he lacked: *camerado, eidolon, elcve, presidentiad, allons, cantatrice* and their obvious kindred. This was from the beginning. After his paralysis, a change crept over his verse: a change of content, in an increased stress upon a religion closer to the conventional; a change of form, in an unguessed slump back toward iambic verse. "Joy, Shipmate, Joy!" quoted above, opens and closes with a three-foot line, and contains five regular four-foot lines between. The opening and closing lines are irregular, in a way permissible in irregular blank verse; outside of these two lines, there are fifteen iambs and one trochee—a regularity approaching Gray. "Song of the Redwood Tree," "Prayer of Columbus," "Out from Behind This Mask," "Now Finale to the Shore" are saturated with fairly regular iambic verse; this is true of almost all of the dated late pieces. The third movement of the redwood apostrophe contains *'mid, unreck'd, know I, befitting, yield we, ye, valleys grand*—the very "stock 'poetical' touches" that he had excised so patiently from his earlier work. The old man grew old: we are apt to forget this. It would have helped if he had bothered more with style. If he was conscious of his rhythmical method, he forgot it, or slurred over his performance of it; if, as is more probable, he never stopped to analyze it, but relied upon an ear attuned to rhythmical liberation, this tricked him at the end back into the formal trappings he had once discarded. His poetry did not gain by this tardy formalism; it still appeared irregular, due to his varying number of feet in the line; but it was now an unrhymed version, more long-lined, of the technique of the "Ode on the

Intimations of Immortality"; and it lacked the compression that the Lake Poet gave, and the poet of Paumanok rarely achieved.

Whitman's cataloging is a general reproach; but it grew out of the depths of his nature. He was primarily mystic, rather than thinker: he felt America, rather than tabulated it statistically: the catalogs fall into his scheme. For the mystic becomes saturated with details until a sudden burst of inner vision welds the many into the one. The mystic may never understand why others do not get the impression of oneness from his multiplicity of details: to him it is an ever-present unity. He attempted to identify all men with Walt Whitman, a cosmos; but he knew almost exclusively only Walt Whitman, one man. He could not subdue his metal to that he worked in, as Shakespeare did; he left us no gallery of breathing portraits. He has given us hundreds of lines, each picturing a separate person; but you cannot often communicate the sense of a person in one line of general description. He has a thousand flashes of the beauty in nature; but he rarely dwelt on one long enough to extract all of its juice. We have a sense of many leaves; we never see "the one red leaf, the last of its clan." In the main, except for fumbling attempts to picture himself, he dealt in generalities; and poetry gains by being specific. There are those who say that poetry must be specific. We have called Whitman an eagle: it is an eagle's view of things below he has given—a view neither microscopic nor introspective. There are only snatched sketches of Whitman's first-hand experience of life in his singing. It may have been a fault in other singers to celebrate their loves, and sing their loves; Whitman never went far beyond celebrating himself. For all his talk of identifying himself with each indi-

vidual, to the ones ranked lowest, this remains talk. Whitman says he is the hounded slave, the handcuffed mutineer, the lover: Shakespeare without vaunting was hounded Othello, groveling Caliban, the bright flame of Juliet, the tempest Lear.

There was a universality in Whitman's rhapsodic vein. He had the Norman gusto, something of the Celtic ecstasy, a slow Anglo-Saxon contemplation. More than this, he furnished a new slant on life—a poet come from the workman class, who did not in his bardship step out of his class. He kept his birthright; he was one voice from the vast crowd, which in the end has as many voices as it has tongues. More than one are beginning to speak today. Whitman believed passionately in his mission to keep always the ear of the people: he has never yet caught it, although something of his substance has been woven into tinkle songs by later poets. He believed in the wide appeal of his roughhewn yawps: "a few years," he wrote in 1855, "and the average annual call for my Poems is ten or twenty thousand copies—more, quite likely." It is difficult to blueprint the future.

His common repute of unconventional frankness on sex matters is as true as it is blameless, as healthy as it is needed as a corrective. Then and now America suffers from that unlovely manifestation of the Anglo-Saxon strain called Puritanism. This self-superior attitude seeks constantly to place a taboo upon all of the body south of the collar and north of the shoetops. The most important element in life, the love force, must be disinfected out of literature, except for such parlor manifestations as might be witnessed to their moral betterment by a Methodist grandmother, a subnormal child of two, or a United States Senator as pictured in his funeral eulogy. This falsifies life, and produces a race of hypocrites.

Whitman loved, frankly and freely, and the Puritans banned him for half a century; the Puritans denied love, and their descendants descend to "petting" parties. The poet was ever the mystic in his physiological statistics, never the panderer to the gross lust of the general.

He has lost the place he craved, as the boon companion of the man in the crowd. That place has been taken by the latest copy of *Doubtful Stories,* and the ochre afternoon paper, smeared over with professional baseball and professional embellishments of scandal. He has earned a place he hardly anticipated, the recognition by the academic minds as the head of his art in this land. This would please him; but he would be more pleased to know how many of the singers who have come after him have found their tongue after finding his words; and how many still to come will arise from the same Antean kiss.

CHAPTER IV

Adah Isaacs Menken: a Forgotten Deborah

It is an odd thing when a country loses a poet—when he drops out of the collective memory as though he had never been. It is another tale when death comes; for memorial editions and posthumous trifles may bloat the decaying reputation far beyond its breathing worth. But —to lose a poet—to forget him wholly—to deny him that thin potent immortality in which—

> Meet we shall, and part, and meet again,
> Where dead men meet, on lips of living men.

—this is a rarer, harsher thing. Even a trifle singer wins more than this: there are thick annotated anthologies, which grant a pale persisting resurrection. Adah Isaacs Menken was no trifle singer; yet she has been swallowed up as if black earth had split under her light feet and closed in granite. She is today a yellowing paragraph in musty chronicles of the stage, a shrinking dozen lines in expanding encyclopedias. She is unknown to the amplest anthologies our eyes have discovered, even to the statistical grubworms of literary history. Her name has hibernated overlong.

The sages are not even one as to her name at birth. The Britannica leads those which state that she was born Dolores Adios Fuertes, daughter of a Spanish Jew in New Orleans; the introduction to the 1890 edition of her

Infelicia is one among the sources which claim that she was born Adelaide McCord, daughter of James McCord, a well-to-do merchant of Chartrain, a village near New Orleans now called Milneburg. In either case, she was born June 15, 1835. Business reverses depressed the family; and the breadwinner died eight years later, leaving three daughters, of whom the poet was the eldest, to the care of a penniless mother. Luckily, the girls had had training in dancing. The two older children were placed in the ballet of the New Orleans Opera House, as the Theodore Sisters; and soon shone as favorites on both sides of the footlights.

Adelaide or Dolores Adios, the brighter of the two, threw herself passionately into the study of Spanish, French, and the classic languages, attempting at twelve a translation of the Iliad. At fourteen she was a woman, whose sensitive beauty was the pride of the town. Before she was seventeen she married a nobody, whose very name has vanished from the archives. He need only be remembered as one who treated her cruelly and then abandoned her.

Still in her teens, she was noted as the "Queen of the Plaza," the darling danseuse at the Tacon Theatre in Havana. An amateur theatrical company wandering wild Texas claimed her next; she founded a short-lived newspaper at Liberty, Texas, was kidnapped by Indians, was rescued romantically by white rangers. She returned to New Orleans, and wooed the gentler lover, literature. In 1856, the year after the first thin *Leaves of Grass* appeared, the woman poet's collection *Memoirs* was published. This received the placid fervor it deserved.

But its author could not stay placid. She "upped stakes" for Texas, and at Galveston, in April of the same

year, married Alexander Isaac Menken, a musician. He was a Jew; she changed her name to Adah, and adopted his faith, retaining both in the changing years that followed. Restless still, she returned to the stage, and in "Fazio" at the Varieties received a tumultuous welcome. Cincinnati, Louisville, a road company touring the South, supporting Edwin Booth part of the time, she continued in rôles in which she showed charm, rather than the tragic deeps. She studied sculpture, became the leading contributor to the Cincinnati *Israelite,* then the leading Jewish paper in America, and was hailed by Baron Rothschild, for her fine article upon his admission to Parliament, as the inspired Deborah of her adopted race.

The stage still called her. At Dayton she was the ecstatic rage, and took up military drilling, being elected Captain in the Life Guards there. About this time she met the pugilist John C. Heenan, the "Benicia Boy," and married him in New York City the next year. The National and Old Bowery theatres knew her; she was a statuesque and stupid Lady Macbeth, a stunning, dazzling Mazeppa. For the four years succeeding 1861 she glittered in this rôle from Albany to London, Paris, Vienna. Her domestic affairs were tangled; she divorced the brutal pugilist husband, married R. H. Newell the humorist, better known as "Orpheus C. Kerr," and soon afterwards one James Barclay. In Europe she was the intimate friend of Dickens (to whom she dedicated her 1868 *Infelicia*), of Swinburne, Charles Reade, Alexandre Dumas, Théophile Gautier. Nobility and royalty paid court to her; the aristocracy of art thronged her salon. In June of that year she became ill in Paris, and died within two months. On her simple tombstone in Père la Chaise is inscribed "Thou Knowest."

In "Miserimus" she voices her chief broken longing, in polyrhythmic lines full of original beauty.

O Bards! weak heritors of passion and of pain!
Dwellers in the shadowy Palace of Dreams!
With your unmated souls flying insanely at the stars!
Why have you led me lonely and desolate to the Deathless Hill of Song?
You promised that I should ring trancing shivers of rapt melody down to the dumb earth.
You promised that its echoes should vibrate till Time's circles met in old Eternity.
You promised that I should gather the stars like blossoms to my white bosom.
You promised that I should create a new moon of Poesy.
You promised that the wild wings of my soul should shimmer through the dusky locks of the clouds, like burning arrows, down into the deep heart of the dim world.
But, O Bards! sentinels on the Lonely Hill, why breaks there yet no day to me?

It is now more than half a century since she asked the question; and the day has not yet broken. But the poet who can pen a line as magnificently descriptive of poets as that great third line:

"With your unmated souls flying insanely at the stars!"

is entitled to daybreak, and a long light. The same figure of broken promise occurs in "Resurgam":

Once the blaze of a far-off edge of living Song crept up my horizon and promised a new moon of Poesy,
A soul's full life!
A soul's full love! . . .
And promised that I should know the sweet sisterhood of the stars,
Promised that I should live with the crooked moon in her eternal beauty.

What does her singing say that life gave her? Love—young love—in its amplitude and sweetness, as "In Vain" witnesses:

When I am a flower—a wild, sweet flower—I will open my glad blue eyes to one alone.
I will bloom in his footsteps, and muffle their echoes with my velvet lips.
So near him will I grow that his breath shall mark kisses on all my green leaves! . . .
So passionately wild in me is this burning unspeakable thirst to grow all beauty, all grace, all melody to one—and to him alone!

She was happy at first in this love; but "Answer Me" shows that fear lurked without:

The trees clash in vain their naked swords against the door. . . .
The darkness presses his black forehead close to the window pane, and beckons me without.
Love holds a lamp in this little room that hath power to blot back Fear.
But will the lamp ever starve for oil?
Will its blood-red flame ever grow faint and blue? . . .
Will it sink rayless to everlasting death?
Answer me—
O, answer me!

Life gave her, not the love she dreamed, but the painted glitter of crowds, the cruel masquerade of mere desire, as told in "Myself":

Now I gloss my pale face with laughter, and sail my voice on with the tide.
Decked in jewels and lace, I laugh beneath the gas-light's glare, and quaff the purple wine.

But the minor-keyed soul is standing naked and hungry upon one of Heaven's high hills of light. . . .
Still I trim my white bosom with crimson roses; for none shall see the thorns.

"My Heritage" indicates that she knew she held what men call Genius; but that men's treatment of it left "the shrouded eye, the trampled leaf, wind-driven and soiled with dust." Her epigrammatic utterances on genius are sharp and stinging:

Genius will find room for itself, or it is none.

To be popular is to be endorsed in the Today and forgotten in the Tomorrow.

There was prescience in this. Her most magnificent single passage is in "Battle of the Stars," in which she paints men assailing the hosts of Heaven, who are genius. Life as she met it was no pretty thing:

Souls for sale! souls for sale!
Souls for sale! who'll buy?
In the pent-up city, through the wild rush and beat of human hearts, I hear this unceasing, haunting cry:
Souls for sale! souls for sale!
Through mist and gloom,
Through hate and love,
Through peace and strife,
Through wrong and right,
Through life and death,
The hoarse voice of the world echoes up the cold gray sullen river of life.

To love she looked for rescue: "I believe that Love may unfold its white wings even in the red bosom of Hell." But she looked in vain. Her favorite symbol, evidently

for herself, was the great ship that went down, with all lost; this she elaborates with power. And the end of the matter? "Life is a lie, and Love a cheat." She goes, in "Into the Depths," "sobbing to the moon, whose icy light wraps me like a shroud":

Come, Eros, thou creator of this divine passion, come and
lay my weary head on your bosom.
Draw me close up to your white breast and lull me to sleep.
Smooth back the damp, tangled mass from my pale brow.
I am so weary of battle—
Take this heavy shield.
I am so weary of toil—
Loosen my garments.
Now, wrap me close in your bosom to rest.
Closer—closer still!
Let your breath warm my cold face.
This is life—this is love!
Oh, kiss me till I sleep—till I sleep—I sleep.

This leads back to the dreadful despair of "Resurgam," with whose happy touches we started. The circle is rounded:

Yes, yes, dear love! I am dead!
Dead to you!
Dead to the world!
Dead for ever!
It was one young night in May.
The stars were strangled, and the moon was blind with the
flying clouds of a black despair. . . .
And so the stark and naked soul unfolded its wings to the
dimness of death! . . .
A Death that left these golden billows of hair to drown the
whiteness of my bosom. . . .
And Death left an old light in my eyes, and old music for
my tongue, to deceive the crawling worms that would
seek my warm flesh. . . .

A Midnight swooped down to bridegroom the Day.
And so I died.
Died this uncoffined and unburied Death.
Died alone in the young May night.
Died with my fingers grasping the white throat of many a prayer.

Her sympathies went beyond herself, as in that piercing figure when she called the needle of the seamstress "thou asp for the breast of the poor!" She had a glow of pride in her own land, which she tells in "Pro Patria," full of fine formal beauty, as in these four scattered stanzas:

Each turret, and terrace, and archway of grandeur,
Its beauty uprounded through laughs of the light;
And world-crown'd America chose for her standard
The blush of the Day and the eyes of the night.

The wave-hosts patrolling the sullen Atlantic,
With helmets of snow, and bright silvery shields,
Ran clamoring up to the seed-sown embrasures,
And fashioned new dews for the buds of the fields.

Thou born of Eternal! The hand that would harm thee
Must wither to dust, and in dust be abhorred.
For thine is the throne whose blue canopy muffles
The footfalls of angels, the steps of the Lord!

Beware! For the spirit of God's retribution
Will make a red sunrise when Liberty dies;
The Traitors shall writhe in the glow of a morning,
And drown in the blood that is filling their eyes.

This is part eloquence, part poetry; but at least it is superior to all of the formal verse of Whitman, with the possible exception of "O Captain, My Captain." Of her racial themes, "Judith" ends on a burst of sadistic vigor,

comparable to Oscar Wilde's "Salome"; "Hear, O Israel!" rings with the full fervor of a Deborah:

Brothers mine, fling out your white banners over this Red Sea of wrath!
Hear ye not the Death-cry of a thousand burning, bleeding wrongs?
Against the enemy lift up thy sword of fire, even thou, O Israel! whose prophet I am. . . .
On the anvil of my heart will I rend the chains that bind ye. . . .
We, the Children of Israel, will not creep to the kennel graves ye are scooping out with iron hands, like scourged hounds!
Israel! rouse ye from the slumber of ages, and, though Hell welters at your feet, carve a road through these tyrants!

It has been a long road; but its end is less misted now than when this warrior maid offered her breast to shield her people from the hail of stabbing arrows.

The anonymous preface to *Infelicia* ends on a strong note:

Even in her brightest poems there is no joy—nothing but a maddened sense of the impossibility of joy which has a sort of delirious ecstasy of its own. It is like the wail of a lost soul that has had a glimpse of heaven, and it appeals with sudden and blinding force to us poor creatures who, grossly hemmed in by our earthly senses, know neither hell nor heaven.

A life as the public's idol, with the adulation of crowned heads and the uncrowned geniuses of the world of letters, brought no happiness to the harried soul. The overcast of melancholy that is Poe's and James Thomson's, whose "City of Dreadful Night" is the despair of a strayed

spirit, was here; not the mere tinge of sorrow that the young songs of Keats, Shelley rang with; not the acid retort of Heine. In her outer and inner life she was endlessly seeking. She found only the pallid Indian pipes of pleasure; never the full-colored blossom of greatest worth, the flower of striving contentment.

Out of these rhapsodies, incoherent at times though they may be; tinged with an occasional sentimentality grown of her sex and her living, sharply different from the wider sentimentality of Whitman's lesser notes; often with rich and arresting music, shapely stanza, deft repetend—out of these poems we get a striking picture of the lovely storm-shaken creature that uttered them. She was not a Sappho, for the Lesbian excelled in the perfected line, and this poet is greatest in sudden starry images bursting upward from a gray lowland of lines. At times she strayed into a taut strained figure which is one of the earmarks of degenerate Imagism today, as in:

> Died with my fingers grasping the white throat of many a prayer.

But we are always conscious that, in her, these are wrought in the torment of fiery emotion; they are not a simulated, studied gymnastic. The poet who can lift to the beauty of a phrase like "the shouting rain" is something more than a tortuous parlor magician of strained verse.

It is uncertain what, if anything, she owes to Whitman in the way of technique. It is of course possible that she had seen his 1855 volume, before she published her collection the next year. But this is not probable; it is more likely another instance of separate discovery at approximately the same time: the liberation was in the air, and

visited these two vastly differing singers independently. Her very rhythms differ from his, holding a feminine softness as opposed to his masculine sturdiness. Closer to her method is the meridional warmth of Arturo Giovanitti and the yielding music of Carl Sandburg's gentler moods; both follow her in the use of a short-lined break among longer dithyrambs. It is certain that she knew Ossian; and from him, and the perennial spring of Hebrew harmony, she may have drawn her craft.

The problem of why she has been overlooked so completely is a more difficult one. A number of reasons must have played their parts. Whitman was loud enough to demand some sort of answer; and the response at once from Emerson and a few others here, and later from thoughtful appreciators across the sea, kept slight breath in his magnificent singing, during the long years when it was flouted and ridiculed by the general. Adah Isaacs Menken was a woman, with a softer voice. It was a thin wedge of Whitman's verse that split at first into the anthologies, with the universal note of Lincoln's death as a contributing reason; it is only recently that the academic gates have unlocked completely. Adah Menken's chants are not short; and the first easy ignoring of her grew habitual. Edgar Lee Masters, in *Domesday Book*, has discovered Menken the person, without being apparently aware of the worth of Menken the poet. He has her say (paraphrasing a letter she wrote a poet, as given in an untrustworthy 1868 pamphlet):

> I know your soul.
> It has met mine somewhere in starry space,
> And you must often meet me, vagabond
> Of fancy without aim, a dweller in tents
> Disreputable before the just. Just think

I am a linguist, write some poems too,
Can paint a little, model clay as well.
And yet for all these gropings of my soul
I am a vagabond, of little use.
My body and my soul are in a scramble
And do not fit each other.

Whether or not she wrote the original of this, it is significant that she is rising above the horizon again. Two years before *Domesday Book,* I called attention to the poems in an extended review. She is entitled to a place as singer of woman's heart, and as poetic innovator; and the unhurried justice of time will grant it to her.

CHAPTER V

Sidney Lanier: Music Weds Poetry

Ancient kings were happy to feed their fools; the modern age manages to starve its poets. The current culture, with its sage guerdons of millions upon astute builders and wreckers of industry, has as yet provided not even a vagabond wage for the chief nourishers of its anemic soul. Byron laughed, as he let toy boats folded of pound bills float down the river; many of the best-known singers have been able to purchase the costly luxury of the opportunity for singing, by a shrewd choice of wealthy parents. For a long space the begging Muse nestled compliantly under the golden wing of the rich and great; but patronage is less of a practice today. Industry, the affluent have learned, brings quicker dividends than inspiration. Coleridge could sing, because of his pension from the Wedgwoods; but no pension came to Poe, or Whitman, or Lanier. We tell the poet to bring his wares to market, finger them dispraisingly, and leave them and their author to wilt and crumble. There is money in drama, to an extent increasing as it decreases in worth; there is more money in jerrybuilding, a flimsy platform of plot, to support intriguing calves to titillate the thick lips of affluence. There is no livelihood for the lyric poet in his singing. Neither the magazine rates for verse nor the volume royalties bring bread to the singer of genuine poetry; and a craving for butter, we adjudge,

is in him vicious and extravagant. Our decision is that the poet must display other wares: the monotonous mental pruning of the teacher, or some sustaining flatland of literary hackwork. This rigor, we hold, will make a man of the singer. A corpse is a kind of man, not without a certain dignity. When we add to the poet nature an inner unadjustability like Poe's, a vagabond soul like Whitman's, a withering disease like Lanier's, we do not make the struggle easier. It may well be that crucifixion is the apt apprenticeship to poetry. A wider song came from unscourged Chaucer, Spenser, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning; it is unsure how much of a rack Shakespeare was stretched upon; and much as they suffered, Milton, Byron, even Burns and Coleridge, were fattened before they were flayed. We are fumbling toward a vagabond wage: certain colleges are establishing an unpedantic chair of poetry; but the thing is far from adequate. That we are not near a solution to this social shrug at the practice of poetry is evident from what we will learn of the lives of Robinson and Frost. There is much to be read in the story of Sidney Lanier.

Jerome Lanier, a Huguenot refugee, was attached to the court of Queen Elizabeth, probably as a musical composer. Unquestionably his son, Nicholas, was high in the smile of the first two Stuarts, as director of music, painter, and diplomat. The Nicholas of the next generation held a similar position under Charles II, and was the presiding officer of the Society of Musicians, incorporated at the Restoration. Four others of the family name were among the incorporators; it is probable that a son of one of these was the Sir John Lanier who fought at the Boyne and fell at Steinkirk. In 1716 a descendant, Thomas Lanier, emigrated to Virginia; a later Thomas

married a cousin of George Washington's. The family is widely scattered today, especially in the South.

The father of the poet was Robert S. Lanier, a lawyer practicing in Macon, Georgia. He was married to Mary Anderson, a Virginian of Scotch descent, of a stock that had inhabited the House of Burgesses for years, and was talented in poetry, music, and oratory. On February 3, 1842, Sidney Lanier, the eldest of three children, was born to this couple in Macon. From childhood he was a passionate devotee of music. At the age of fourteen he entered Oglethorpe College, an institution of Presbyterian mood then near Midway, Georgia, which was decently interred during the war years. After breaking the course with a year as post-office clerk in Macon, he graduated in 1860 at the head of his class. In April, 1861, being a Southerner, he enlisted as a private—a rank he retained throughout the war, at his own request, to remain near his younger brother. He began to experience the premonitions of tuberculosis, against which he was to wage a failing battle for the next fifteen years. While in charge of a blockade-runner, he was captured and held for five months in Point Lookout prison, squired by his faithful flute. Just before the end of the war, he was exchanged, and tramped the long trip home, arriving utterly exhausted. He underwent six weeks of desperate illness; at its end, his mother died of consumption. He clerked in Montgomery, Alabama, came to New York to arrange for the publication of his hasty novel, *Tiger Lilies,* taught in Prattville, Alabama, and married Mary Day, of Macon, who was thereafter his chief comfort. The dark years were upon him; he traveled from Texas to Pennsylvania and all the ground between, in search of health. He had a brief happiness in Baltimore, as first flute for the Peabody Symphony Concerts, and as

lecturer at Johns Hopkins and elsewhere on poetry and English literature. His father urged him to return to Macon and the law; the son wrote:

> How can I settle myself down to be a third-rate struggling lawyer for the balance of my little life, as long as there is a certainty almost absolute that I can do other things so much better?

On September 8, 1881, the disease conquered. During his life he had received slight appreciation, chiefly for his small volume of poems (1876), and his *Science of English Verse,* based upon a lecture series (1880); but he received as much ridicule, especially toward his "Centennial Cantata," given out in 1876. He understood that, then as now, the clever stand between the artist and the public. In another poignant letter he wrote:

> My experience in the varying judgments given about poetry . . . has all converged upon one solitary principle, and the experience of the artist in all ages is reported by history to be of precisely the same direction. That principle is, that the artist shall put forth, humbly and lovingly, and without bitterness against opposition, the very best and highest that is within him, utterly regardless of contemporary criticism. What possible claim can contemporary criticism set up to respect—that criticism which crucified Jesus Christ, stoned Stephen, hooted Paul for a madman, tried Luther for a criminal, tortured Galileo, bound Columbus in chains, drove Dante into a hell of exile, made Shakespeare write the sonnet "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," gave Milton five pounds for Paradise Lost, kept Samuel Johnson cooling his heels on Lord Chesterfield's doorstep, reviled Shelley as an unclean dog, killed Keats, cracked jokes on Gluck, Schubert, Beethoven, Berlioz, and Wagner, and committed so many other impious follies and stupidities that a thousand letters like this could not suffice even to catalogue them?

He persisted to the end. His last lectures had to be dictated to his wife; he delivered them almost at the point of collapse. He wrote his final and greatest poem, "Sunrise," with a fever temperature of a hundred and four degrees. This came at the end of a long struggle, not for comfort, but for necessity: for bread. Bread is the melancholy strain of constant references, in letters and literary product. He turned his hand to all the hack-work that he could obtain: to the lectures, which he regarded as no more; to boys' versions of four great classics; to advertising guide-books descriptive of Florida and the Asheville region. Somehow he got the bread, although he went without the meat. One late winter he actually saw a small assured income ahead for that year. And then he died.

Poe was a keen, at times a waspish, critic of poetry; Whitman's chants and words stressed healthy roadmarks for the journey of present and future poetry. Lanier's *Science of English Verse* is a well-considered effort toward a better understanding of this still nebulous field. It does over-emphasize the element of music, and propound unbuttressed theories, such as his insistence that sound intervals in simple ratio underlie all English verse. It must never be forgotten that poets write first, and then grammarians and critics spring up like toadstools upon the rotting trunk; or, better, like agents of decay upon the perishing oyster that encloses the pearl. At least the pearl endures. "Prose, scientifically considered, is a wild variety of verse," wrote Lanier. He was in the suburbs of the truth, which is that prose and verse are both varieties of utterance, the first marked by a tendency toward complexity of rhythm, the other, by a tendency toward unity. Lanier rode his hobby-horse so faithfully that he was forced to conclude that Shakespeare's aban-

donment of end-stop lines in his later plays made his form a "noble and free species of verse which is really a prose, throughout which some secondary rhythm (iambic, trochaic, or the like) is consistently carried." This "species of verse which is really a prose" was Lanier's mis-description for the rhythm which the greatest poetry always assumes instinctively. If he decided thus against Shakespeare, what would he do with Whitman? Perhaps what he did is characteristic:

> Whiteman is poetry's butcher. Huge raw collops slashed from the rump of poetry, and never mind gristle—is what Whitman feeds our souls with.

It is healthy fare, at that, and builds more brawn than Italian spaghetti and French pastry. We can discard the gristle easily enough; there are those who never furnish the meat.

But Lanier is not among them. A few more than a dozen of his poems, and we have numbered the enduring ones; but what a dozen they are! His function was to wed his innate music to poetry, in a closer union than had hitherto been accomplished by any poet. At times the blend is a trifle cloying; the music is as overpoweringly wordy as Swinburne. But he never stretches the monotony far; the metrical liberation of Kubla Khan, the sudden shift in meter within the verses, is his heritage and his salvation.

Two of the marsh songs, "Sunrise" and "The Marshes of Glynn," show him at his greatest. He has eternalized, from man's standpoint, his landscapes, in exquisite melody:

> The tide's at full: the marsh with flooded streams
> Glimmers, a limpid labyrinth of dreams.

Each winding creek in grave entrancement lies
A rhapsody of morning stars. The skies
Shine scant with one forked galaxy,—
The marsh brags ten: looped on his breast they lie.

His closing apostrophe to the sun is wide-gestured:

Manifold One,
I must pass from thy face, I must pass from the face of the Sun:
Old Want is awake and agog, every wrinkle a-frown;
The worker must pass to his work in the terrible town:
But I fear not, nay, and I fear not the thing to be done;
I am strong with the strength of my lord the Sun:
How dark, how dark soever the race that must needs be run,
I am lit with the Sun.

O never the mast-high run of the seas
Of traffic shall hide thee,
Never the hell-colored smoke of the factories
Hide thee,
Never the reek of the time's fen-politics
Hide thee,
And ever my heart through the night shall with knowledge abide thee,
And ever by day shall my spirit, as one that hath tried thee,
Labor, at leisure, in art—till yonder beside thee
My soul shall float, friend Sun,
The day being done.

He ends with the utmost simplicity of rhyme, a sustained insistence such as we found in "The Conqueror Worm," used as wings of ecstasy, rather than despair. No less magical is his farewell to the same symbol, in the other poem:

The marsh is meshed with a million veins,
That like as with rose and silver essences flow,
In the rose-and-silver evening glow.

Farewell, my lord Sun!
The creeks overflow: a thousand rivulets run
'Twixt the roots of the sod; the blades of the marshgrass stir;
Passeth a hurrying sound of wings that westward whirr;
Passeth, and all is still; and the currents cease to run;
And the sea and the marsh are one.

Ecstasy, in these two poems, is the dominant note; and ecstasy was the Celtic contribution. There is a formal shapeliness about another poem, "The Revenge of Hamish," which stands out as the finest ballad written on American soil. It is great in its whole course; it is sustained to its conclusion, when the triumphant lashed bondman Hamish—

Sprang with the child in his arms from the horrible height in the sea,
Shrill screeching, "Revenge!" in the windrush; and pallid Maclean,
Age-feeble with anger and impotent pain,
Crawled up on the crag, and lay flat, and locked hold of dead roots of a tree—

And gazed hungrily o'er, and the blood from his back drip-dripped in the brine,
And a sea-hawk flung down a skeleton fish as he flew,
And the mother stared white on the waste of blue,
And the wind drove a cloud to seaward, and the sun began to shine.

This has the successful formal construction of "The Raven"; if it is a less universal theme, it is a higher, less condescending treatment. The brief "The Bee" is for its span equally lovely. With these his tithe of unquestioned mastery ends.

He has written fine short lyrics, "Barnacles," "A Ballad of Trees and the Master," "Marsh Song at Sun-

set," "The Song of the Chattahoochee," "The Stirrup Cup," "Evening Song," and the sonnets "Acknowledgment"; but no one of these has the undisputed magic of "To Helen." One of the sonnets has the mood of the Shakespearean one formerly named: it is a wrenching crystallization of much of the poet's attitude:

If I do ask, How God can dumbness keep
While Sin creeps grinning through His house of Time,
Stabbing His saintliest children in their sleep,
And staining holy walls with clots of crime?—
Or, How may He whose wish but names a fact
Refuse what miser's-scanting of supply
Would richly glut each void where man hath lacked
Of grace or bread?—or, How may Power deny
Wholeness to th' almost-folk that hurt our hope—
These heart-break Hamlets who so barely fail
In life or art that but a hair's more scope
Had set them fair on heights they ne'er may scale?—
Somehow by thee, dear Love, I win content:
Thy Perfect stops th' Imperfect's argument.

The intensity of the emotion makes certain phrases stumble; the reflection in tranquillity comes only at the end. A passage in "June Dreams in January" makes the thing even more localized and incarnate:

Then he that wrote laid down his pen and sighed;
And straightway came old Scorn and Bitterness,
Like Hunnish kings out of the barbarous land,
And camped upon the transient Italy
That he had dreamed to blossom in his soul.
"I'll date this dream," he said; "so: 'Given, these,
On this, the coldest night in all the year,
From this, the meanest garret in the world,
In this, the greatest city in the land,
To you, the richest folk this side of death,
By one, the hungriest poet under heaven,

—Writ while his candle sputtered in the gust,
And while his last, last ember died of cold,
And while the mortal ice i' the air made free
Of all his bones and bit and shrunk his heart,
And while soft Luxury made show to strike
Her gloved hands together and to smile
What time her weary feet unconsciously
Trode wheels that lifted Avarice to power,
—And while, moreover,—O thou God, thou God—
His worshipful sweet wife sat still, afar,
Within the village whence she sent him forth
Into the town to make his name and fame. . . .
—Read me," he cried, and rose, and stamped his foot
Impatiently at Heaven, "read me this,"
(Putting th' inquiry full in the face of God,)
"Why can we poets dream us beauty, so,
But cannot dream us bread? Why, now, can I
Make, aye, create this fervid throbbing June
Out of the chill, chill matter of my soul,
Yet cannot make a poorest penny-loaf
Out of this same chill matter, no, not one,
For Mary, though she starved upon my breast?"

This poem was published fifteen years after it was written, and three years after the poet's death.

In some of his longer poems we find flashes of his best. "Individuality" amplifies the indictment of the "Acknowledgment" sonnet; "The Symphony" blows it to Heaven in stern judgment:

Yea, what avail the endless tale
Of gain by cunning and plus by sale?
Look up the land, look down the land,
The poor, the poor, the poor, they stand
Wedged by the pressing of Trade's hand
Against an inward-opening door
That pressure tightens evermore;
They sigh a monstrous foul-air sigh
For the outside leagues of liberty. . . .

"Each day, all day," these poor folk say,
"In the same old year-long, drear-long way,
We weave in the mills and heave in the kilns,
We sieve mine-meshes under the hills,
And thieve much gold from the Devil's bank tills,
To relieve, O God, what manner of ills?—
The beasts, they hunger, and eat, and die,
And so do we, and the world's a sty;
Hush, fellow-swine: why nuzzle and cry?
Swinehood hath no remedy
Say many men, and hasten by,
Clamping the nose and blinking the eye.
But who said once, in a lordly tone,
Man shall not live by bread alone
But all that cometh from the Throne?
Hath God said so?
But Trade saith *No:*
And the kilns and the curt-tongued mills say *Go!*
There's plenty that can, if you can't: we know.
Move out, if you think you're underpaid.
The poor are prolific; we're not afraid.
Trade is trade."

There are other passages in this poem in the exquisite mood of John Hall Wheelock's "Divine Fantasy"; it ends on the lofty note, "Music is Love in search of a word." But there is much that is stern: and are we rooted that Cassandra babbles?

"The Crystal" is sublimated criticism, just short of poetry in its entirety; but it has lovely touches. In "Corn" we find:

Old hill! old hill! Thou gashed and hairy Lear
Whom the divine Cordelia of the year,
E'en pitying Spring, will vainly strive to cheer.

He is inclined to overdo bookish references, as in:

Over the monstrous shambling sea
Over the Caliban sea.

"Poems distilled from poems pass away," chanted "poetry's butcher." He has given us flashes of beauty:

> Birth is but a folding of our wings.
>
> Star-drops lingering after sunlight's rain.

His poem outlines show more of his uncensored utterance; he was at heart an essential anarchist, with his "Every rule is a sign of weakness . . . a law is a badge of disgrace"; and "Lo, he that hath helped me to do right . . . hath covertly hurt me; he hath insidiously deflowered the virginity of my will; I am thenceforth not pure me. . . . Let me alone." There is ancestry for the imagistic technique in some of the delightful bits here; but Lanier always considered them as outlines merely. The clock had not yet been set back to the hour when they were to be set upon the inmost shrine. His

> So pray we to the God we dimly hope
> Against calamities we clearly know

sets him apart from Chesterton and Robinson, whose eyes know deeper than hope. In most of his less effective poems, there is a pleasant gentility of contemplation; but it is in a deep and unhappy sense true of him that:

> His song was only living aloud,
> His work, a singing with his hand.

Francis Thompson, another consumptive, and another son of song lashed by the scourge of heavy reality, has been accused of bizarre figures, in such lines as those in which he refers to what would follow if the sun——

> Like a golden bee
> Sting the West to angry red.

The same leaping imagery is in the earlier American poet, with his picture of the sun as "the star-fed bee, the build-fire bee," and with his Course-of-things, in the shape of an ox, browsing upon the clover of genius. When Lanier slumped, it was into a flatland of uninspired contemplation, a bog of unimportant dialect, or a thin echo of eighteenth century capitalized abstractions.

To evaluate fitly the poems that do not falter, it is helpful to evaluate the man. Gamaliel Bradford[1] has furnished the most complete and fairest summary: "Lanier," he says, "lived in a spiritual whirlwind, until it snuffed him out." Lanier called life as he found it no dreaming idyl, but the hottest of all battles. "I am continually and increasingly amazed at the intense rate of life at which I have to live here," he wrote of his New York experiences. He was not phlegmatic at rebuffs: "I dread rejection like a mad lover," he confided. His thinking, as well as his emotional creation of art, was born and lived in turmoil. In the Poem Outlines, he says:

> Thought, too, is carnivorous. It lives on meat. We never have an idea whose existence has not been purchased by the death of some atom of our fleshly tissue.

Yet he was willing to pay the price: "To die, consumed by these heavenly fires: that is infinitely better than to live the tepid lives and love the tepid loves that belong to the lower planes of activity." A sensitive and at the same time tempestuous artist soul, who offered himself and his ailing body to be driven to the heavy plow over rocky ground, in order not to starve—this was the poet.

Out of this he achieved a half-dozen enduring and

[1] *American Portraits: 1875–1900.* By Gamaliel Bradford. (Houghton-Mifflin Co.)

well-wrought lyrics, and slightly more longer rhapsodies, of which at least half are of high rank throughout. Poe took the tools of poetry as they came to him; and while he introduced his own sweet small discords in the technique of all except "The Raven," there was no essential broadening of the method of poetry in his work. Whitman was primarily an innovator in utterance, achieving a magnificent flight at his best. Lanier was also of the clan of originators. The irregular ode form had long been known in English poetry; but in his typical poems, he achieved a welding of musical form to the spoken word that was distinctly his own. These are done at a high pitch of emotion: at times literally a fevered pitch. The polyrhythmical chant and the shapely musical improvisation—these were America's first two contributions to the formal side of poetry. It is good, too, that both came from men who were men in a wide fine sense: men zephyr-gentle to acknowledge the fact of brotherhood in all, men tempestuous against the bitter widespread follies of injustice and the corrosive mood of Cain.

CHAPTER VI

Emily Dickinson: The Shrinking Seer

Most poets are inhabited by a triple imperative: to bring up from the deep hidden pools of their unconscious the desires and decrees that toss and twitch there; to clothe these in a garmentry of singing beauty; and, last, to paint them across the sky, until all who read may run in the flame of their exultation, or fade in the wither of their despair. There are those who lack the first inner mandate: they are the embroiderers, the eloquent with no word to say. Those who lack the second urge are the voices who always fall beneath the topmost flight, for lack of the craft of singing. A rarer shyer sort lack the third element, the advertising flair, the itch for poetic publicity that is needed to overcome the deaf inertia of wearied man. Often these have shining vision within them, at times wed to a shining melody; but unless others press the public utterance of the living poet, or collect the wandering fragments of the dead singer, there will be forever no general communion in the song. We do not know how many chief voices have stilled finally for want of this thrill in the wide flaunt of their singing. The desert air is quick to gulf forever the unseen fragrance.

Emily Dickinson was one of those who lacked the third trait, the exhibitionist desire; to some extent she lacked even the second, the inner whip of the polisher of the first

white-hot lines. It may have been that she polished toward exact fidelity to her vision, rather than toward accepted poetic music; or that she filed toward a new and unrecognized music. The impression is that she was content to create the jewel, and leave it rough. So many are her jewels, that this may have taken all her hours or all her energy.

The poet was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. On May 15, 1886, she died there. Her father, Edward Dickinson, was a cultured lawyer, who served at one time as Congressman, and for years as treasurer of Amherst College. Up to her death, only three or four of her poems had been reluctantly published. Four years later, two of her friends, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Todd Loomis, edited a first selection from her copious manuscript treasures. A second compilation appeared the year following, with the same editorship; her *Letters* were brought out in 1894; Miss Loomis alone sponsored a third series of the poems in 1896. *The Single Hound,* selected by her niece, was given out in 1914, and the *Complete Poems* in 1924. It is a posthumous fame that she has earned; living, she shrank into an inexplicable seclusion. She was apparently eighteen when she first wrote; or, rather, when she first shared her poems with her sister and other members of her immediate family. The introduction to the last volume refers to those who dwelt with the poet "behind her hedge": it was an actual hedge of utmost privacy that the poet insisted upon. At first she was a fascinating part of the home life of her sister, Susan, and her two brothers; she was a facile pianist, a pleasing entertainer. Her living was as whimsical as her verse often is. Commissioned once to drown four superfluous kittens, she placed them in a fire-shovel and dropped

them, in the basement, in the first convenient jar, while the family was at church. It happened to be the pickle jar. The sequel occurred when a dignified judge was dining with the Dickinsons; and as was her wont, at the ensuing calamity she flitted to her room and locked the world out, until the reproaches had starved for lack of an object to feed upon. Her mind was brilliant, and in these early days she chose her friends among men rather than women, scorning the purring indirection of the less widely contacted sex. Her personal appearance was striking, in the inevitable white dress, her warm bronze-chestnut hair parted on the brow and low in the neck, and half covered by a velvet snood of the same tint. Her cheeks were white velvet.

"In spite of an innate austerity of the senses," writes the niece in her introduction, "my Aunt had lovers, like Browning's roses—'all the way'—to the end; men of varied profession and attainment . . . (including) maturer friendships, literary, Platonic, Plutonic; passages varying in intensity, and at least one passionate attachment whose tragedy was due to the integrity of the lovers, who scrupled to take their bliss at another's cost."

"By temperament and habit she was a recluse, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep," says Mr. Higginson. What it was that lived thus in seclusion cannot be learned from photographs—there are few enough of her; it can be better learned from the soul-negatives that she threw off so often—her poems, which spread an increasing effect upon the poets succeeding her.

Her poetry dealt primarily with herself—her nature, her moth flights toward love, her keen vision of the little things around her, of the larger currents that are universal in life, and tend toward the universal goal of life.

Adventure most unto itself—
The Soul condemned to be;
Attended by a Single Hound,
Its own Identity.

"Exclusion" catches her own discriminating nature in a wider gesture:

The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

Unmoved, she notes the chariot's pausing
At her low gate;
Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
Upon her mat.

I've known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then shut the valves of her attention
Like stone.

We will find little unimportant in her work; many poems lack the highest distinction, but still zoom with a good yeoman flight. That the secluded one thought well of herself appears from the knee-wearied emperor sentenced forever to remain without the portals. A shining whimsey passes sentence upon those who aim their words at other ears:

I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us—don't tell!
They'd banish us, you know.
How dreary to be somebody!
How public, like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!

Grief she could stand with level eyes; but joy made her drunken:

I taste a liquor never brewed
From tankards scooped in pearl;
Not all the vats upon the Rhine
Yield such an alcohol!

Inebriate of air am I,
And debauchee of dew,
Reeling, through endless summer days,
From inns of molten blue.

When landlords turn the drunken bee
Out of the foxglove's door,
When butterflies renounce their drams,
I shall but drink the more!

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats,
And saints to windows run,
To see the little tippler
Leaning against the sun.

This exquisite whimsey is not her usual mood; more often she stoops beneath a realization that her David pebble has left unharmed Goliath world. One of her sharpest poems, "Return," paints her unwillingness to return to a home abandoned, for fear she would not be welcomed. And all of her catacomb dwelling was in vain, she felt:

To my quick eyes the leaves conferred;
The bushes they were bells;
I could not find a privacy
From Nature's sentinels.

In cave if I presumed to hide,
The walls began to tell;
Creation seemed a mighty crack
To make me visible.

The immense vigor of her images is something to marvel at. The scientific age was a leering banshee to her; her fear was that, in Heaven, the very children had become new-fashioned, and would laugh at her upon her entrance. Her daily living was shivery:

I stepped from plank to plank
So slow and cautiously;
The stars about my head I felt,
About my feet the sea.

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch,—
This gave me that precarious gait
Some call experience.

Disenchantments came; she blamed herself for having plated ware among her silver, not realizing that fragile beauty and more fragile life may break of themselves. "Parting" was wrenched out of her agonized enlargement of her own unpleasures:

My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me,

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

Separation both the highest joy and the deepest anguish —here the mystic speaks her odd star-language.

The joy of love is uttered with dainty charm in "The Letter," and its succeeding poem. In "The Lovers" she has an objective view of the theme:

Till those two troubled little clocks
Ticked softly into one.

She is stronger when more subjective:

Alter? When the hills do.
Falter? When the sun
Question if his glory
Be the perfect one.

Surfeit? When the daffodil
Doth of the dew;
Even as herself, O friend!
I will of you!

Yet she cannot trust love; she fears that paradise entered is no longer paradise. This, she says, is why the lady dare not remove the veil from her face. This is a not uncommon craft of living; but not for those who taste deeply its cataracting zest. A queer symbolic poem in the fourth volume pictures the worm that grew within her room to be a snake, from which she fled in escape: "This was a dream," she ends. Eve did not flee the mottled persuasiveness; and the world is thronged with the result. But Emily Dickinson fled; and only an amethyst remembrance remained of the jewel she put by. She still knew the lure of fruit forbidden, as a gay verse tells. Three poems picture her as wife; but there was the snake from which she fled, after all.

In Nature she found her religion,

With a bobolink for a chorister,
And an orchard for a dome

and with God for the preacher. She was in harmony with both worlds, man's and the other:

It makes no difference abroad,
The seasons fit the same,
The mornings blossom into noons,
And split their pods of flame.

Wild-flowers kindle in the woods,
The brooks brag all the day;
No blackbird bates his jargoning
For passing Calvary.

A touch as sweetly contemplative as W. H. Davies sometimes speaks in her:

How happy is the little stone
That rambles in the road alone,
And doesn't care about careers,
And exigencies never fears;
Whose coat of elemental brown
A passing universe put on;
And independent as the sun,
Associates or glows alone,
Fulfilling absolute decree
In casual simplicity.

She doubts if morning can actually come: "Has it feet like water-lilies? Has it feathers like a bird?" Sunset is a daily holocaust to her; and night—

Lightly stepped a yellow star
To its lofty place,
Loosed the Moon her silver hat
From her lustral face.
All of evening softly lit
As an astral hall—
"Father," I observed to Heaven,
"You are punctual."

The wind is an eerie visitor to her; the storm tramples across her pages, the summer makes its light escape, the

snow smooths with its alabaster wool. The grass, the mushroom, the clover, the exquisite rose—

> I had rather dwell like her
> Than be Duke of Exeter.
> Royalty enough for me
> To subdue the bumble-bee!

The snake writhes across the book, and as before—

> But never met this fellow,
> Attended or alone,
> Without a tighter breathing,
> And zero at the bone.

The bluebird finds speech in her, and twice the robin, both times in lovely music:

> Forever cherished be the tree,
> Whose apple Winter warm,
> Enticed to breakfast from the sky
> Two Gabriels yestermorn.
> They registered in Nature's book
> As Robin—Sire and Son,
> But angels have that modest way
> To screen them from renown.

The bat is laureated in verse as astringently intellectual as Edwin Arlington Robinson's; even the railway is allowed to speak delectably. But out of all of it her dominant mood is pain.

Shall we call it a fault that there are so many continuing excellences in the books? When she comes to treat of life, hope, joy, memory, faith, each finds apt and finished tongue. And yet the dream does not come to earth for her: success is sweetest to her, as one of those

who have not reached it. Life is pain leading to death; and pain is uttered with enduring poignance.

> Elysium is as far as to
> The very nearest room,
> If in that room a friend await
> Felicity or doom.
>
> What fortitude the soul contains,
> That it can so endure
> The accent of a coming foot,
> The opening of a door!

She was surely one of the race of Sensitives. Rebel at heart, she felt that public profession of this meant chains and a cell. In her own soft way she identified beauty with truth; and in the quiet around her heard only danger, fearing less the garnet tooth of the volcano than its quiet purr. Life, at the end, is that upon which Things pound, until death brings cool release.

She is an empurpled laureate of death. She sees it as an accolade of dignity and democracy—as general as the air, as the rain and the snow. More, she faces it with exultation, as when an inland soul first sights the sea. And after death—

> The bustle in a house
> The morning after death
> Is solemnest of industries
> Enacted upon earth,—
>
> The sweeping up the heart,
> And putting love away
> We shall not want to use again
> Until eternity.

As a result of death, someone "has lost the face That made existence home!" When death has come to her,

there is no hint that she will suffer a spring change into pushing grass and flaunting rose; she will withdraw further into a dusty quietude that hardens slowly into a "granite lip."

Yet beyond death she sees, through those fantastic glasses that we call mysticism, a personal immortality, though kingdoms "like the orchard Flit russetly away." The mystic beyond-knowledge receives clearest tongue in—

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.

That she did not take dogmatic mansions above too seriously appears in this delicious fooling, which is blood brother to Rupert Brooke's charming piscatorial "Heaven":

Papa above!
Regard a Mouse
O'erpowered by the Cat;
Reserve within thy kingdom
A "mansion" for the Rat!

Snug in seraphic cupboards
To nibble all the day,
While unsuspecting cycles
Wheel pompously away.

In more mordant mood she sees in herself "the supreme iniquity," fashioned in a contraband moment by deity's

self. His deeds she judges and much condemns; she apologizes to God for his deceit in fashioning her. Upon life she passes stern sentence:

> Apparently with no surprise
> To any happy flower,
> The frost beheads it at its play
> In accidental power.
> The blond assassin passes on,
> The sun proceeds unmoved
> To measure off another day
> For an approving God.

That fumigation of the vocabulary, which eradicates all poetic left-overs of dead speech, and which is one of the negative virtues of present-day poetry, is hers in high degree. An occasional inversion or retreat into the solemn style is found; but she was far too faithful to reality to parrot moribund twitter compound of *athwart, welkin, yestreen, amaranth, asphodel, —eth* and *—est, thee, thy, ye.* She had something definite to say; even if it were a mystic nebulosity, it was visioned and uttered with crystal clarity. So distrustful was she of stock poeticisms, that she fled even from the tinkle of accurate rhyme. Half or more of her closing sounds are near-rhymes, assonances: this, in the frequency of its usage, seems a cultivated eccentricity. Yet her poems are great or not independent of this; the technique suffices. We forgive an occasional gipsying of grammar, so intent are we to catch the meaning behind the sound.

That flash of sheer poetic genius that broke in occasional lines of Adah Isaac Menken's, as in the magnificent description of the poets—

"With your unmated souls flying insanely at the stars!" speaks here in the garnet tooth of the active

volcano, the single hound of identity, frost as the blond assassin, and in constant amazing other places. This poet thought in glittering metaphors, felt with shriveling vision. Her poems are highly concentrated: she lacked the heaving abandon of Whitman and Menken, the melting music long drawn out of Lanier; she did not even reach the shaped length of "The Bells" and "The Raven." But she wrote many more enduring poems than any of these except Whitman; she never sagged as low as each of them did. The former woman poet can be forgiven for her obsolescences, for after all she died the year before Edwin Arlington Robinson was born. Emily Dickinson died ten years before the first slim Robertson volume made its appearance; and that book was at most a false dawn to the modern poetic period, unperceived for almost a score of years after it came. All the more astonishing that this singer wore the modern gown so long before it grew to be the healthy style.

A mystic is one who turns from the microscope and the telescope to the faith within; Emily Dickinson was of this precious kindred. The realist may scoff at the baseless certainty, as Walter B. Pitkin does, in the introduction to his *As We Are,* discussing the poem "I never saw a moor":

> The realist, on the other hand, is not going to brag of his knowledge of heather before he has seen a moor. And he observes that people who have never seen the sea are woefully inexact in their description of waves. He has good reason to believe that the poet's familiarity with moor, sea, and heaven was, in plain fact, considerably less than the knowledge of boxing possessed by a youth who has taken a correspondence course in the noble art of self-defense.
>
> It is inevitable, of course, that the unrealistic person takes himself much too seriously. His most casual fancies he regards as cosmic events. . . . The "creative mind" believes

that the whole world does want the fruits of its spirit. . . . But the realist knows that this is perfumed piffle. What people want is something good, true, or beautiful; and they do not care whether it is the fruit of any spirit or the product of a patent sonnet-manufacturing machine with a detachable rhyming gear. The world is interested in poets and authors only insofar as they "deliver the goods."

It is helpful to have the perfumed piffle separated from the unperfumed variety; even if the realist does not finally decide whether Shakespeare was a creative spirit or a patent sonnet-manufacturing machine with a detachable rhyming gear. Chesterton mourns the loss of one especial part of the spirit's mechanism: the apparatus for writing the Book of Job. Mysticism, to the realist, is a self-hypnosis or worse; we call upon Miss Dickinson to aid this case:

> The brain within its groove
> Runs evenly and true;
> But let a splinter swerve,
> 'Twere easier for you
> To put the water back
> When floods have slit the hills,
> And scooped a turnpike for themselves,
> And blotted out the mills!

If mysticism is a mental failing, at least it is a prized one. Such songs as she sang are welcomed by a world self-battered, until it die unless it find nepenthe never known to mortal lips. At its worst, mysticism is its own cousin, insanity; at its best, it is a leap toward reality faster than the brain can go. Those near-truths that we call truth appear first as mists, visible only to the seers; then slowly crystallize as years pass, until they assume the earth-form called science. Between the insistent realist and the mystic is a permanent cleavage:

So we must keep apart,
You there, I here,
With just the door ajar
That oceans are.

as this poet words it. There are those who have outgrown that ancient oversight, that the earth-hounded body and spirit continue in happier air after they leave tangible air. But to Emily Dickinson and the many it persists; and hers is song to fill its cup to overflowing.

CHAPTER VII

The Fallow Years: New Folk Rhythms

Time has its hours of snowy rest, to punctuate the green seasons; all things have their pendulum swing. It took time for the seeds of Whitman's singing to sprout and bud, for the ecstasy of Poe and Lanier to come to lyric fruitage in America. From the decades after the Civil War to the decade of the World War there was a long silence, broken by the late songs of singers we have noted, and by a scanty choir of thinning worth. Miss Lowell has pointed out that the slow vigor of Wordsworth and the bright sparkle of Byron gave way, as models, to the sickly-sweet songs of the younger Tennyson, the stodgy maunderings of Matthew Arnold; there was also a mild afterglow of the pre-Raphaelite swamp-fire in our small dismals. But this meant no great singing, and little singing at heart American. The land took its time.

There was an old song hidden in America which began to reach the light during these years, with enthusiastic fanfaronades of pseudo-psychological patter proclaiming it the logical present and future of our continental song. This was the poetry, largely the folk poetry, of the American Indian, or Amerind. An embracing collection of this, *The Path on the Rainbow,* has been edited by George Cronyn; Natalie Curtis Burlin has given us *The Indians' Book,* Mary Austin *The American Rhythm;*

others have uttered volumes of more or less Amerind poems, and scattered poems and studies on the theme. There is a bewildering heterogeneity in the product: the opening chapters of First Chronicles and the hundred and fourth Psalm are no further apart than certain of these verses attributed to the copper-skinned acolytes of Manitou.

The Tlingit translations show close affinity to Ezra Pound and his apostle Kreymborg. The first movement of "The Parted Lovers," done from the Abanaki by John Reade, reads like a literal misinterpretation of "My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose"; Washington Matthews' Navajo "Song of the Dawn Boy" is as repetitive as best seller plots:

Beauty before me,
With it I wander.
Beauty behind me,
With it I wander.
Beauty below me,
With it I wander.
Beauty above me,
With it I wander.
Beauty all around me,
With it I wander.

Constance Lindsay Skinner offers a charming love song from the Haida of Queen Charlotte's Island, and this exquisite Spring song of Pai-iya:

I on the thighs of God, as the leaf on the willow!
I the song of his lips and the light of his mirth. . . .

I the drums of his walking where the mountains roll the echo,
I the bellying mist on his seas that sail the world;
I the speech of his rivers to the stark and silent places,

I the chant of his stars, descending through the dark to the
sea-call,
I the reedy flutes of his peace.

Mary Austin's "Neither Spirit nor Bird," from the Shoshone, and "Song of a Passionate Lover," from the Yokut, have a faint magic redolent of the fuller fragrance of Rose O'Neill:

Come not near my songs,
You who are not my lover,
Lest from out that ambush
Leaps my heart upon you!

When my songs are glowing
As an almond thicket
With the bloom upon it,
Lies my heart in ambush
All amid my singing;
Come not near my songs,
You who are not my lover!

Little use has been made of this matrix in current American singing, although Carl Sandburg, Lew Sarett, and infrequent others have essayed it. Sarett's "Box of God" is an ambitious attempt to do the thing largely. His discordant Indian patois fails:

"My frien', Ah-deek, you ask-um plenty hard question:
Ugh! w'ere Keetch-ie Ma-ni-do he live?
W'ere all dose Eenzhun spirits walk and talk?
Me—I dunno! . . . Mebbe . . . mebbe over here,
In beaver-bond, in t'rush, in gromping bull-frog;
Mebbe over dere, he's sleeping in dose mountain."

In singing contrast to this are the nature passages:

Beyond the peaks
That tusked the sky like fangs of a coyote snarling,
The full-grown mellow moon that floated up

Like a liquid-silver bubble from the waters,
Serenely, till she pricked her delicate film
On the slender splinter of a cloud, melted,
And trickled from the silver-dripping edges. . . .
Then from the swale, where shadows pranced grotesquely,
Solemn, like phantom puppets on a string
A cry—pointed, brittle, perpendicular—
As startling as a thin stiff blade of ice
Laid swift and sharp on a fever-burning flesh:
The tremulous wail of a lonely shivering wolf,
Piercing the world's great heart like an icy sword.

In all of this chorus, if there is actual poetry being written in English by living Indians, it has largely escaped critical notice.

Despite the adulative jargoning, there are deep reasons why little may be expected from this source. Miss Austin has labored, in vigorous self-contradiction, to trace rhythm, including Amerind rhythm, to physical experience, in part from external sensory impressions printed by labor, walking, riding, in part from "the major rhythms of the human organism . . . given by the blood and the breath." The iamb she identifies as the rhythm of the heart; the trochee, the inhibition of the blood by the smaller vessels. A little later she has arrived at:

> Poetry is a man's game. Women are only good at it by a special dispensation, as men are occasionally good at millinery.

Yet women are held by some to breathe, and to contain an adequate circulatory system; and surely there is rhythm in their never-done labor or leisure. Miss Austin places Indian poetry as filling the gap between the stage at which the earliest discovered Greek poetry had arrived, and the primordial yawp of Adam's forest father. There

is something to be said for her view; yet a truer reinterpretation of her material lies in Sarett's declaration:

> The North American Indian . . . has no special form of expression called poetry.

The Indian product is a blend of tune, dance-steps, words, and bodily and architectural ornamentation; and poetry is words to an inner tune. Miss Austin shrewdly says that an Amerind poet would have compressed "the whole Christian myth into one bitter cry,

> My God! My God!
> Why hast Thou deserted me?
> Hi-ihiya, naiho-o,
> It is finished,
> In beauty it is finished
> Nai-ho-o!"

This is a quaint squeezed substitute for the New Testament; there might have been less sacerdotal recrimination and carnage, if this had been the one text. But it is at best a shibboleth eloquent only to the initiated: it is not yet poetry.

Nor does Miss Skinner bring us much closer, with her charming theory that the redmen heard the rhythm of brook and river, of sun and wind; and that these too can speak in our poetry. The streams of Lesbos and Springfield, Illinois, made the same sweet quarreling; the poetry was not one.

Deeper than this, it is not American, this Amerind product, in the sense in which we are. The Indians over much of their wide domain have been extirpated: there survives one Indian to some forty Negroes here, and there is one Negro to ten whites. The Indians have had little common blending of their cultures with the whites;

every aspect of Indian life is alien to us. The fragments of their singing are at best translations from an alien race, an alien tongue, a culture utterly alien. These fragments should be cherished for whatever they have to contribute. But the Romans domiciled in Carthage stayed Romans still, in fact and in art; successive conquerors of England did not base their song on that of the earlier inhabitants, until the racial mingling had been consummated. It is doubtful if Amerind song is kin to the poetry of Pound, Rose O'Neill, and the others; the kinship lies in the translators.

There was another rich seed sown, which is only now coming toward harvest—the typically American strain of Negro poetry, particularly as embodied in the Negro spirituals. No matter how rooted these may have been in African soil, they were set out anew in our own land, and came to blossom in our own speech. These melodious slave songs, products of unnamed and often unlearned bards, have at times a naif beauty of phrasing that lifts them high above the parlor formalism of the academic echoists. Take such a song as "Freedom":

> O Freedom! O Freedom!
> O Freedom, over me;
> And before I'd be a slave
> I'd be buried in my grave,
> And I'll go back to my God
> And be free.

A race's bitter yearning and dogged determination spoke in this high note. At times it grew more militant, as in this powerful chant:

> When Israel was in Egypt's land,
> (Let my people go!)
> Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
> (Let my people go!)

Thus said the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go!
If not, I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go!

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

A softer, more resigned beauty breathes through other songs:

I looked over Jordan an' what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me a home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home,

or this haunting song:

I know de moonlight, I know de starlight;
I lay dis body down. . . .
I walk in de graveyard, I walk troo de graveyard,
To lay dis body down.

I lay in de grave an' stretch out my arms,
I lay dis body down.
I go to de judgment in de evenin' of de day
When I lay dis body down,
An' my soul an' yo' soul will meet in de day
When I lay dis body down.

There is no less melodic beauty in "Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen," "Deep River," "You May Bury Me in de East," and many more. Quaint, gay-hearted, powerfully musical, America has full reason to be proud

of these folksongs its darker brothers offer in their proud humility.

The secular folk rhymes, collected by Professor Thomas W. Talley in his *Negro Folk Rhymes,* range from the light and whimsical to something far different. We have notes as charming as:

Ef I wuz de President
Of dese United States,
I'd eat good 'lasses candy
An' swing on all de gates!

as primitive as this song of new-wedded bliss,

First Month: "Set down in my cabin, honey!"
Second Month: "Stan' up, my pie!"
Third Month: "You go to wu'k, you wench!
You well to wu'k as I!"

as richly humorous as:

Dere wuz a little kickin' man,
His name wuz Simon Slick.
He had a mule wid cherry eyes.
O, how dat mule could kick!

An', Suh, w'en you go up to him,
He shet one eye an' smile;
Den 'e telegram 'is foot to you,
An' sen' you half a mile!

The true feeling of the slave begins to erupt in verses like:

My name's Ran, I wu'ks in de san',
But I'd druther be a Nigger dan a po' white man.

Gwineter hitch my oxes side by side,
An' take my gal fer a big fine ride. . . .

Gwineter take my gal to de Hullabaloo,
Whar dere ain't no Crackers in a mile or two. . . .

I'd druther be a Nigger, an' plow old Beck,
Dan a white Hill Billy wid his long red neck.

and in this irreverential emendation:

"Our Fadder, Which art in Hebb'n!"—
White man owe me 'leben an' pay me seben.
"Dy Kingdom come! Dy Will be done!"
An' if I hadn't tuck dat, I wouldn't git none.

There was tempered steel in these whispered rhymes:

Die in the pig-pen fightin'.
Yes, die, die, in de wah!
Die in the pig-pen fightin'!
Yes, die wid a bitin' jaw! . . .

Yes, my ole Mosser promise me;
But his papers didn't leave me free.
A dose of pizen he'ped 'im along.
May de Devil preach 'is funeral song! . . .

Missus an' Mosser a-walkin' de street,
Deir han's in deir pockets an' nothin' to eat.
She'd better be home washin' up de dishes,
An' a-cleanin' up de ole man's raggitty britches.
He'd better run 'long an' git out de hoes,
An' clear out his own crooked weedy corn rows;
De Kingdom is come, de Niggers is free,
Hain't no Nigger slaves in de Year Jubilee.

Modern Negro poetry has escaped much of this bitterness bred of slave years. James Weldon Johnson, com-

piler of the valuable *The Book of American Negro Poetry,* in his intransigent introduction boldly claims that the American Negro

> is the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil, and been universally recognized as distinctive American products.

He lists the Uncle Remus folk tales, the spirituals, modern ragtime music, and modern jazz dancing, as the products. To this we would add Amerind basket-weaving, Whitman's polyrhythmic poetry, and the short story as crystallized into form by Poe. Are there further things artistic to balance the Negro contribution? The race that gave Pushkin to Russia, Dumas and Maran to France, Coleridge-Taylor to England, the artist Tanner and Burleigh, Cook, and other distinguished musicians and poets to America, may at any time give us a poet of the first rank. We have referred to Phyllis Wheatley, ornate slave singer in the earliest period of colonial poetry; the roll for the last fifty years is a long one. Alberry A. Whitman possessed a formal excellence; Paul Laurence Dunbar sang soft dialect melodies, like a gentler Aframerican Longfellow:

Some folks say dat dancin's sinful, an' de blessed Lawd, dey say,
Gwine to punish us fuh steppin' w'en we hyeah de music play.
But I tell you I don't b'lieve it, fuh de Lawd is wise an good,
An' he made de banjo's metal an' he made de fiddle's wood,
An' he made de music in dem, so I don't quite t'ink he'll keer
Ef our feet keeps time a little to de melodies we hyeah.
W'y, dey's somp'n' downright holy in de way our faces shine,
When Angelina Johnson comes a-swingin' down de line.

John Wesley Holloway's dialect verses from Georgia have a brusquer vigor. James Weldon Johnson, from Florida, Claude McKay, from Jamaica, and Fenton Johnson, from Illinois, pulse with an awakening racial consciousness; there is a group of admirable lyric poets, who break at times into melodious poignancy. The race is still conscious of its unvelvetted lot, as McKay sings:

> Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
> And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
> Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
> I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
> Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
> Giving me strength erect against her hate.
> Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
> Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
> I stand within her walls with not a shred
> Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
> Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
> And see her might and granite wonder there,
> Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
> Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

A disillusioned clarity is his, as in "On the Road":

> Roar of the rushing train fearfully rocking,
> Impatient people jammed in line for food,
> The rasping noise of cars together knocking,
> And worried waiters, some in ugly mood,
> Crowding into the choking pantry hole
> To call out dishes for each angry glutton
> Exasperated grown beyond control,
> From waiting for his soup or fish or mutton.
> At last the station's reached, the engine stops;
> For bags and wraps the red-caps circle round;
> From off the step the passenger lightly hops,
> And seeks his cab or tram-car homeward bound;
> The waiters pass out weary, listless, glum,
> To spend their tips on harlots, cards and rum.

"The Lynching" is an eloquent sonnet, wrenched out of the tortured heart of a race:

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.
Day dawns, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun.
The women thronged to look; but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

In a mood as casually ultimate as Sandburg's better things, Fenton Johnson gives us "Tired":

I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody else's civilization.
Let us take a rest, M'Lissy Jane.
I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and sleep the rest of the night on one of Mike's barrels.
You will let the old shanty go to rot, the white people's clothes turn to dust, and the Calvary Baptist Church sink to the bottomless pit.
You will spend your days forgetting you married me and your nights hunting the warm gin Mike serves the ladies in the rear of the Last Chance Saloon.
Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many. It is better to die than it is to grow up and find out that you are colored.
Pluck the stars out of heaven. The stars mark our destiny. The stars marked my destiny.
I am tired of civilization.

Georgia Douglas Johnson, born in Georgia, in "The Suppliant" phrases a more vivid attitude than that of the Uncles and Aunties of the preceding generation:

Long have I beat with timid hands upon life's leaden door,
Praying the patient, futile prayer my fathers prayed before,
Yet I remain without the close, unheeded and unheard,
And never to my listening ear is borne the waited word.

Soft o'er the threshold of the years there comes this counsel cool:
The strong demand, contend, prevail; the beggar is a fool!

William Stanley Braithwaite, of this race, is both lyricist and editor of the annual anthologies of magazine verse, which have played their potent shaping part in the modern awakening of poetry. James Weldon Johnson, in spite of the distractions of his work as diplomat, publicist, and anthologist, is the author of delightful dialect verses, as well as lyrics and poems imbued with the unsettled problems of his darker brothers. We have, in "An Explanation," the unctuous humor of the Negro at its best:

"Look heah! 'Splain to me de reason
Why you said to Squire Lee,
Dar wuz twelve ole chicken thieves
In his heah town, includin' me."

"Ef he tole you dat, my brudder,
He said sump'n dat warn't true;
W'ut I said wuz dis, dat dar wuz
Twelve, *widout* includin' you."

"Oh! . . . . .!"

His "The Creation," a Negro sermon not in dialect, is an interesting innovation; his "Brothers" is the fairest

and finest poem on the theme of lynching we have encountered; "Fifty Years" is an eloquent summary of a black hour in our history:

This land is ours by right of birth,
  This land is ours by right of toil;
We helped to turn its virgin earth,
  Our sweat is in its fruitful soil. . . .

And yet, my brothers, well I know
  The tethered feet, the pinioned wings,
The spirit bowed beneath the blow,
  The heart grown faint from wounds and stings;

The staggering force of brutish might,
  That strikes and leaves us stunned and dazed;
The long, vain waiting through the night
  To hear some voice for justice raised.

He speaks challengingly to his America:

How would you have us, as we are—
Or sinking 'neath the load we bear?
Our eyes fixed forward on a star—
Or gazing empty at despair?

Rising or falling? Men or things?
With dragging pace or footsteps fleet?
Strong, willing sinews in your wings—
Or tightening chains about your feet?

The unsuspected thing is that there is no Southern state, without one or more Negro poets who now publish volumes of verse, no matter how these are ignored in Southern tabulations of current Southern literature, and no matter how slow the white anthologists are to recognize their song. Among these worthy singers are

Benjamin Brawley (South Carolina), Alice Moore Nelson Dunbar (Lousiana), Waverly Turner Carmichael (Alabama), the Cotters, father and son (Kentucky), Alex Rogers, George Marion McClellan, and the late Roscoe C. Jamison (Tennessee), Leslie Pinckney Hill and two recently deceased singers, Lucian B. Watkins and Daniel Webster Davis (Virginia), Anne Spencer (West Virginia), besides Charles Bertram Johnson (Missouri), Jessie Fauset (New Jersey), and Ray G. Dandridge (Ohio). Most promising of all is young Countee P. Cullen. The music-laden soul of the Negro has not yet found an adequate poet of wide gesture; but there is every reason for anticipating that he will come; and we will be the richer for this lilting addition to the three original English strains.

There were a few thin notes worth recording, even during the sterile silence. Stephen Crane (1871–1900), born at Newark, New Jersey, vagabonding after college days to the conflict of the Greeks against Turkey, and to the Spanish-American war, dying of consumption in Baden before thirty, will chiefly be remembered for his realistic story of the Civil War, *The Red Badge of Courage*. A memorable study of his life, by Thomas Beer, has just appeared—a triumph of brilliant biography. In 1895 Crane published a slim volume, *The Black Riders, and Other Lines,* which had a fresh compressed technique recently grown familiar, and showed sharp vision. His method was an irregular blank verse, primarily iambic. His art is not kindly.

> In the desert
> I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
> Who, squatting upon the ground,
> Held his heart in his hands,
> And ate of it.

I said, "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter, bitter," he answered;
"But I like it,
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."

He understood the source of the poet's lines, which is not a patent sonnet-machine:

Many red devils ran from my heart
And out upon the page;
They were so tiny
The pen could mash them.
And many struggled in the ink.
It was strange
To write in this red muck
Of things from my heart.

His verdict upon the human comedy was an acid one:

A god in wrath
Was beating a man;
He cuffed him loudly
With thunderous blows
That rang and rolled over the earth.
All people came running.
The man screamed and struggled
And bit madly at the feet of the god.
The people cried,
"Ah, what a wicked man!"
And—
"Ah, what a redoubtable god!"

The names of Richard Hovey and Bliss Carman are associated together, for their spirited "Songs of Vagabondia." The former died at thirty-six; but he had tried his hands at liberating rhythms, and had with the older

nature lover written jolly songs of the road life. His was the true spirit of the vagabond:

When the wind comes up from Cuba,
And the birds are on the wing,
And our hearts are patting juba
To the banjo of the spring,
Then it's birds of a feather,
When good fellows get together,
With a stein on the table, and a cheer for everything. . . .

For we know the world is glorious,
And the goal a golden thing,
And that God is not censorious
When his children have their fling;
And life slips its tether
When good fellows get together,
With a stein on the table, in the fellowship of spring.

William Vaughn Moody (1869–1910) made his name as a dramatist, as well as poet. He was a keen observer, suffused with a strident scorn of a world ill-led, a home-earth straying into wild ways of sword-slaughter. His "Gloucester Moors" shows him at his sternest, with its elaboration of a great old image:

This earth is not the steadfast place
We landsmen build upon;
From deep to deep she varies pace,
And while she comes is gone.
Beneath my feet I feel
Her smooth bulk heave and dip;
With velvet plunge and soft upreel
She swings and steadies to her keel
Like a gallant, gallant ship. . . .

God, dear God! Does she know her port,
Though she goes so far about?
Or blind astray, does she make her sport
To brazen and chance it out?

I watched where her captains passed;
She were better captainless.
Men in the cabin, before the mast,
But some were reckless and some aghast,
And some sat gorged at mess.

By her battened hatch I leaned and caught
Sounds from the noisome hold,—
Cursing and sighing of souls distraught
And cries too sad to be told.
Then I strove to go down and see,
But they said, "Thou art not of us!"
I turned to those on the deck with me
And cried, "Give help!" But they said, "Let be:
Our ship sails faster thus." . . .

But thou, vast outbound ship of souls,
What harbor town for thee?
What shapes, when thy arriving tolls,
Shall crowd the banks to see?
Shall all the happy shipmates then
Stand singing brotherly?
Or shall a haggard ruthless few
Warp her over and bring her to,
While the many broken souls of men
Fester down in the slaver's pen,
And nothing to say or do?

Even more saturated with this mood of social protest is his "An Ode in Time of Hesitation" and the briefer "On a Soldier Fallen in the Philippines." This was the comment of one who felt himself above the ranks of the unhappy shipmates; it has a wider poetic mood than the sharp verse of John Boyle O'Reilly (1844–1890), which rings with something of the same feeling. Charlotte Perkins Gilman (born 1860), a brilliant member of the cultured Beecher family, is regarded less as a poet than as a popularizer of feminist theories; but mordant satire

rooted in genuine poetry breathes through such pieces as "The Commonplace," "A Man Must Live," "Hardly a Pleasure," and the scintillating "Similar Cases." There is more of the song and less of the sword in "A Common Inference":

A night: mysterious, tender, quiet, deep;
Heavy with flowers; full of life asleep;
Thrilling with insect voices; thick with stars;
No cloud between the dewdrops and red Mars;
The small earth whirling softly on her way,
The moonbeams and the waterfalls at play;
A million million worlds that move in peace,
A million mighty laws that never cease;
And one small ant-heap, hidden by small weeds,
Rich with eggs, slaves, and store of millet seeds.
They sleep beneath the sod
And trust in God.

A day: all glorious, royal, blazing bright;
Heavy with flowers; full of life and light;
Great fields of corn and sunshine; courteous trees;
Snow-sainted mountains; earth-embracing seas;
Wide golden deserts; slender silver streams;
Clear rainbows where the tossing fountain gleams;
And everywhere, in happiness and peace,
A million forms of life that never cease;
And one small ant-heap, crushed by passing tread,
Hath scarce enough alive to mourn the dead!
They shriek beneath the sod,
"There is no God!"

Edwin Markham (born 1852) is ordinarily regarded as a one-poem poet, that poem being the favorite "The Man With the Hoe." Even more than Moody, he uses the antiquated gesture of the school of eloquence, and is prone to adopt the mannerisms of the "What time" and "Like as" sonnetteers and their artificial kin. The poem

referred to lives by virtue of its impelling speech, and its essential timeliness. It has been called "the battle-cry of a thousand years"; recent industrial and political experiments in various lands have unexpectedly hurried the clock. Its indictment is high-spirited:

> O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
> How will the Future reckon with this Man?
> How answer his brute question in that hour
> When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?
> How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—
> With those who shaped him to the thing he is—
> When this dumb Terror shall reply to God,
> After the silence of the centuries?

Another poem, "Lincoln," is as a whole more sustained, although even here the mood of eloquence often replaces the higher flight. It contains the sharp image, "His words were oaks in acorns," and the resounding conclusion:

> And when he fell in whirlwind, he went down
> As when a lordly cedar, green with boughs,
> Goes down with a great shout upon the hills,
> And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.

It may be difficult for some to differentiate this poetry rooted in mere contemplation, from poetry lit by an inner fire; but the difference is there. It is the difference between Gray and Blake, between "The Seasons" and "Kubla Khan." One is hale everyday fare; the other is milk and honey from a fairer Canaan. Here is dignified observation of something neither dignified nor woven of observation; eloquent treatment of a text taken from words wrung out of agony. There are poems wrenched out of the torture itself.

With these, the tale is done. There are those who find in the indiscriminate lines of Horace Traubel the stuff of poetry; but he survives, like a Boswell-Johnson, rather for his official report of Whitman's last months, and for the memory of his heartening personal contacts, than for his unshaped "Optimos." Edward Carpenter in England is drowsing into the same oblivion, as far as his verses go. During this period we had the pleasant and popular verses of John Hay, Bret Harte, James Whitcomb Riley, and Eugene Field. There were accomplished formalists in verse, George Edward Woodberry, Lizette Woodworth Reese, Anna Hempstead Branch, Louise Imogen Guiney, George Sterling, Percy Mackaye, and Madison Cawein chief among them. There is little distinctively American in their work; in several of them, there is little distinctive. Rounded poignancy and orotund eloquence there are in plenty, soft contemplation and frigid passion: but these are not the stuff of living poetry. More important than any of these is Adelaide Crapsey (1878–1914), a critical craftsman in the main, with a garnish of amaranth and asphodel. She is at her best in fragile fragmentary songs:

Never the nightingale,
  Oh, my dear,
Never again the lark
  Thou wilt hear;
Though dusk and the morning still
Tap at thy window-sill,
Though ever love call and call
Thou wilt not hear at all,
  My dear, my dear.

and these two of her cinquains, "November" and "Triad":

Listen. . .
With faint dry sound,
Like steps of passing ghosts,
The leaves, frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
And fall.

There be
Three silent things:
The falling snow . . . the hour
Before the dawn . . . the mouth of one
Just dead.

This was the hour before the dawn; it is given us to live in the day that follows.

CHAPTER VIII

Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Darkening Hill

Rarely do we find a poet whose message is so simple and unified as that of Edwin Arlington Robinson. It is that mankind has failed: a bleak and somber judgment. Its mood is summed up in lines taken from "The Ballad of the White Horse," by G. K. Chesterton—that poet who is ranked by Theodore Maynard and others as the chief singing voice of the other great branch of the English race.

> I tell you naught for your comfort,
> Yea, naught for your desire
> Save that the sky grows darker yet,
> And the sea rises higher.
>
> Night shall be thrice night over you,
> And heaven an iron cope.
> Do you have joy without a cause,
> Yea, faith without a hope?

It is the first six lines of this that fix the tone of Robinson's magnificent singing. He would not have written it in this way; he tends more to the human reality than the airy symbol; he looks less forward than behind and around him. But the mood of the two is one.

The father of the poet, Edward Robinson, of good Anglo-Saxon lineage, was a grain merchant in the village of Head Tide, Maine, where this son was born on December 22, 1869. Two or three years later the family moved to the town of Gardiner, Maine; and both of these

at that time were bleak with an air of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Even the Gardiner mansion, the seat of the local squire, was dark for the time, with the fortunes of its owners under a thick cloud; and this decaying "House on the Hill" is etched desolately in one of the earlier poems. After completing the course at Gardiner High School, and two years in Harvard College ended by his father's illness, the young poet went to work at writing to support himself. In 1896 a small volume, *The Torrent and the Night Before,* was privately printed; with *The Children of the Night,* the year succeeding, his work had fully commenced.

The poet moved at this time to New York City, and commenced the long struggle to market a golden, unmarketable commodity. Five years later appeared *Captain Craig, and Other Poems.* This received a laudatory notice from Theodore Roosevelt, then President. Roosevelt showed his admiration for the poetry in an even more practical way; he lifted the author out of the New York subway, where he was working as inspector of construction, to a desk in the Custom House in New York City, which he held from 1905 to 1910. It is said that he was assiduous in this position; but there is also the heretical story that on one occasion he received a letter from a superior, asking him to call at least often enough at his desk to receive his salary. It could not have been inspiring work; at last he gave it up, and has found a lonely livelihood from the limited appreciation of his poetry. *The Town Down the River* (1910); two plays; *The Man Against the Sky* (1916); *Merlin, The Three Taverns, Lancelot, Avon's Harvest, Roman Bartholow* and *The Man who Died Twice* since then, mark the present sum of his product. He has never married, and lives quietly in the winters in Brooklyn, and in the

summers at the McDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire. High recognition has come recently to his work, with awards by the Lyric Society, the Authors Club of New York, the Poetry Society of America, and the Pulitzer Foundation, connected with Columbia University. He is generally regarded by critics of ample equipment as the chief figure of present-day American poetry.

A study of the slim *Children of the Night*, as compared with his latest volume, indicates little growth: nor was growth needed, to entitle him to the highest laurels among our living singers. Acid drawings of human failure, a filed technique, a sense of crashing drama, an astounding felicity of phrase, were his from his beginning. He has never bettered the finish of "Richard Cory," in that early collection. He says that whenever Richard Cory went down town:

> We people on the pavement looked at him:
> He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
> Clean favored, and imperially slim.
>
> And he was always quietly arrayed,
> And he was always human when he talked;
> But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
> "Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.
>
> And he was rich,—yes, richer than a king,—
> And admirably schooled in every grace;
> In fine, we thought that he was everything
> To make us wish that we were in his place.
>
> So on we worked, and waited for the light,
> And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
> And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
> Went home and put a bullet through his head.

This is a compressed human tragedy, told by a master. Nothing so finished, in human portraiture, had yet ap-

peared in America, nor, in such brevity, in England. We see the subject of the poem, and the group of observers, among whom is the poet. The former crashes down in a July bolt of suicide; the others worked on, "and went without the meat, and cursed the bread." Lanier went without the bread, it is true; but this is failure enough—failure above and below: man, in the poet's vision, is adjudged bankrupt, whether he be richer than a king, or poorer than a king. For all his rainbow wonder of exquisite phrasing in later longer poems, Robinson never steps appreciably outside this theme. Man is a failure: this is the end of the matter, in the poet's eyes. The bankruptcy is limited to man, it should be noticed; no judgment is passed upon the wider scheme of things. There is nothing of the cosmic sweep of Whitman, no ecstatic vista of the human comedy or tragedy, depending on which side of the cloud you observe; much less anything of the vaster tragi-comedy of which "the drifting mote called man" is so small a part. The whole text is simpler than such a viewpoint requires: it is merely the bleak reverse of human success. Failure comes down many roads, in this singing; but its coming is sure.

> There is ruin and decay
> In the House on the Hill:
> They are all gone away,
> There is nothing more to say.

The title poem is a well-wrought exhortation against the dark. It strangely foreshadows the later "The Man Against the Sky," with its:

> And if there be no other life,
> And if there be no other chance
> To weigh their sorrow and their strife
> Than in the scales of circumstance,

'T were better, ere the sun go down
Upon the first day we embark,
In life's imbittered sea to drown,
Than sail forever in the dark.

The materialist, he says, is insane; he proceeds—

And if God be God, he is Love;
And though the Dawn be still so dim,
It shows us we have played enough
With creeds that make a fiend of Him. . . .

It is the faith within the fear
That holds us to the life we curse;—
So let us in ourselves revere
The Self which is the Universe!

This is his more hopeful note: the dawn is dim, present conceptions of God make a fiend of him, and man curses life. The conclusion gustily begs that men appear henceforth as "Children of the Light." Typically, this is omitted from the later "Collected Poems."

No matter what we are, or what we sing,
Time finds a withered leaf in every laurel.

Robinson goes further than Time; almost all of the leaves, to him, are withered. "Reuben Bright" is typical of how he lets life shatter itself. Death is not the end in this, but a wreckage more sensitively dreadful than death. Its last line has a fainter crash than "Richard Cory"; but it is no less withering.

It is worth noting that the poetic vocabulary, long divorced from life, which still mars much of our current piping, is eliminated at the start from this poetry. Almost a score of years before the 1913 boom in verse,

we find Robinson singing with the clipped, actual vocabulary that is one of the crowns of the newer technique. His "Isaac and Archibald," in the second book, foreran Frost's homely studies of rural New England, and with high honor to Robinson; "Richard Cory" and a score more said, in finished form, the gist of what "Spoon River" subsequently declaimed, with none of the earlier singer's art, though with more obviousness. Robinson is seed as well as fruit. A quaint humor plays over the charming trifle to Melchizedek and Ucalegon—a strain broadened in the subsequent "Miniver Cheevy." But in the main humor flies rarely near him, and flits after giving a brief and austere glance.

> There, where western glooms are gathering,
> The dark will end the dark, if anything;
> God slays himself with every leaf that flies,
> And hell is more than half of paradise.
> No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies—

So sang the first book. He was not always so cheerful. Aaron Stark, the miser, "with eyes like little dollars in the dark"; John Evereldown, evermore following the call of women; Cliff Klingenhagen, Charles Carville, Fleming Helphenstine, James Wetherell—here we have a memorable start for the living portraits of the little world of Tilbury Town that is the poet's chief achievement. Tilbury Town may well be his recollection of Gardiner—failure, recollected in tranquillity. His thoughtful indictmen of the world of men appears in the sonnet to George Crabbe, whose poems are ignored for—

> Books that are as altars where we kneel
> To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.

There is one surprising note:

> To get at the eternal strength of things,
> And fearlessly to make strong songs of it,
> Is, to my mind, the mission of that man
> The world would call a poet. He may sing
> But roughly, and withal ungraciously;
> But if he touch to life the one right chord
> Wherein God's music slumbers, and awake
> To truth one drowsed ambition, he sings well.

This over-limitation of the poet's function might exclude its author. His songs are strong; but their theme is more endless decay than eternal strength: a half picture at best, which can awake man at most to half truth. But the poet's mission is wider than this octave sings; and Robinson, standing outside his own definition, is a poet, and a great one.

The title poem in "Captain Craig" is an overlong study of felicitous failure. This, as are all of his longer things, is an unexplored continent, with tangled forests of cerebration and buried gems of epigram and beauty-flash. An inserted sonnet indicates how, of the two roads indicated in the first book, stark unexplained tragedy and subtler, less apparent horror, he is going the latter way.

> Carmichael had a kind of joke-disease,
> And he had queer things fastened on his wall.
> There are three green china frogs that I recall
> More potently than anything, for these
> Three frogs have demonstrated, by degrees,
> What curse was on the man to make him fall:
> "They are not ordinary frogs at all,
> They are the Frogs of Aristophanes."
>
> God! how he laughed whenever he said that;
> And how we caught from one another's eyes

The flash of what a tongue could never tell!
We always laughed at him, no matter what
The joke was worth. But when a man's brain dies,
We are not always glad. . . . Poor Carmichael!

His mastery of fluid rhythm breaks out of regular verse into such a Spring song as:

For on a day like this,
When the chaff-parts of a man's adversities
Are blown by quick spring breezes out of him,
When even a flicker of wind that wakes no more
Than a tuft of grass, or a few young yellow leaves,
Comes like the falling of a prophet's breath
On altar-flames rekindled of crushed embers.

There is a deep sense of human brotherhood speaking through the lips of the old derelict:

But there is this to be remembered always:
Whatever be the altitude you reach,
You do not rise alone; nor do you fall
But you drag others down to more or less
Than your preferred abasement. . . . What you take
To be the cursedest mean thing that crawls
On earth is nearer to you than you know;
You may not ever crush him but you lose,
You may not ever shield him but you gain.

The tempo grows more fevered toward the end:

Tears
Rolled out at last like bullets from his eyes,
And I could hear them fall down on the floor
Like shoes. . . .

We waited there
Till each of us, I fancy, must have made
The paper on the wall begin to squirm,
And then got up to leave.

Poetry of this sort is a divine flying in the face of prosy truth; an imaginative exaggeration truer than apparent truth; truth prestoed by emotion.

If the title poem is bird-shot rather than buck-shot, "Isaac and Archibald," which follows, is wholly successful—a childhood memory of two old men, each of whom, unknown to the other, detected the coming breakdown in the other, and failed to study his own mirror. There is the polished tribute to Lincoln, and a flood of village portraits, among which "Miniver Cheevy," "Doctor of Billiards" and "How Annandale Went Out" are notable. The last of these is drama pressed into a sonnet; he is capable of doing it in a couplet. One human mannerism is faithfully caught in "with a slight kind of engine" for the hypodermic needle. At times the poet himself speaks in this circumambulating fashion —and often effectively.

"The Man Against the Sky" brought him the general obeisance of the critics for the first time. Hardly a line falters, to the end. The astringent technique, the squeezed tragedy, the purple beauty of conclusions are all at their best. "Flammonde," one of the triumphs, carries the polish of the individual line to the shapeliness of Pope and Dryden, without their quarantine from life:

> Erect, with his alert repose
> About him, and about his clothes,
> He pictured all tradition hears
> Of what we owe to fifty years.
> His cleansing heritage of taste
> Paraded neither want nor waste;
> And what he needed for his fee
> To live, he borrowed graciously.

There was "a small satanic sort of kink" in his brain, however; there is, in Robinson's characters; there may

be in all the cousins of the ape. One of the quintessential lines occurs near the close:

> We've each a darkening hill to climb.

This is life, in the poet's vision. It is not inevitable; there are hills that trail clouds of glory, at whose top at one stride comes the dark. But to Robinson's men and women it is the legend over the cave-door to the Inferno that is life. Poems like "The Gift of God" and "Eros Turannos," which succeed this, are beyond critical elevation. They close with bursts of glowing music; in the first, the dazzled esteem in which a mother holds a son at whom the village looks askance is pictured:

> His fame, though vague, will not be small,
> As upward through her dream he fares,
> Half clouded with a crimson fall
> Of roses thrown on marble stairs.

in the other, we learn of a woman moving in the illusion of a happy love:

> Meanwhile, we do no harm; for they
> That with a god have striven,
> Not hearing much of what we say,
> Take what the god has given;
> Though like waves breaking it may be,
> Or like a changed familiar tree,
> Or like a stairway to the sea
> Where down the blind are driven.

The poet steps out of himself in "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," an amazing picture of the master's practice and his endless hanker for "that House in Stratford":

> Shakespeare, who alone of us
> Will put an ass's head in Fairyland
> As he would add a shilling to more shillings,
> All most harmonious—and out of his
> Miraculous inviolable increase
> Fills Ilion, Rome, or any town you like
> Of olden time with timeless Englishmen—

a great picture. The master is neither large in wine nor in love; but in vision:

> He knows how much of what men paint themselves
> Would blister in the light of what they are. . . .
>
> It's all Nothing.
> It's all a world where bugs and emperors
> Go singularly back to the same dust,
> Each in his time.

Poem after poem glistens with its unique perfection. The concluding title peace is a brave attempt, foredoomed to failure, to establish a case for more than mortality. It has a lusty ending:

> If after all that we have lived and thought,
> All comes to Nought,—
> If there be nothing after Now,
> And we be nothing anyhow,
> And we know that,—why live?
> 'Twere sure but weaklings' vain distress
> To suffer dungeons where so many doors
> Will open on the cold eternal shores
> That look sheer down
> To the dark tideless floods of Nothingness
> Where all who know may drown.

He has his Shakespeare say, "It's all Nothing"; he cannot bring himself to say it. This would be well taken,

if life were only dungeons. Life in Tilbury Town, to him, seems to have been; but Tilbury Town does not reach from Kamschatka clear around the southern world to Kamschatka; and not a few men live without it.

Cassandra, in this volume, is a magnificent indictment of a wide land:

I heard one who said: "Verily,
What word have I for children here?
Your Dollar is your only Word,
The wrath of it your only fear.

"You build it altars tall enough
To make you see, but you are blind;
You cannot leave it long enough
To look before you or behind.

"When Reason beckons you to pause,
You laugh and say that you know best;
But what it is you know, you keep
As dark as ingots in a chest.

"You laugh and answer, 'We are young;
O leave us now, and let us grow.'—
Not asking how much more of this
Will Time endure or Fate bestow.

"Because a few complacent years
Have made your peril of your pride,
Think you that you are to go on
Forever pampered and untried?

"What lost eclipse of history,
What bivouac of the marching stars,
Has given the sign for you to see
Millenniums and last great wars?

"What unrecorded overthrow
Of all the world has ever known,
Or ever been, has made itself
So plain to you, and you alone?

"Your Dollar, Dove, and Eagle make
  A Trinity that even you
Rate higher than you rate yourselves;
  It pays, it flatters, and it's new.

"And though your very flesh and blood
  Be what your Eagle eats and drinks
You'll praise him for the best of birds,
  Not knowing what the Eagle thinks.

"The power is yours, but not the sight;
  You see not upon what you tread;
You have the ages for your guide,
  But not the wisdom to be led.

"Think you to tread forever down
  The merciless old verities?
And are you never to have eyes
  To see the world for what it is?

"Are you to pay for what you have
  With all you are?"—No other word
We caught, but with a laughing crowd
  Moved on. None heeded, and few heard.

It is all true, including the casual horror of the last line. "The Three Taverns," his next collected volume, sustains this singing, but does not deepen it except in the brief lyric "The Dark Hills" and the serene "The Mill":

The miller's wife had waited long,
  The tea was cold, the fire was dead;
And there might yet be nothing wrong
  In how he went and what he said:
"There are no millers any more,"
  Was all that she had heard him say:
And he had lingered at the door
  So long that it seemed yesterday.

Sick with a fear that had no form
She knew that she was there at last;
And in the mill there was a warm
And mealy fragrance of the past.
What else there was would only seem
To say again what he had meant;
And what was hanging from a beam
Would not have heeded where she went.

And if she thought it followed her,
She may have reasoned in the dark
That one way of the few there were
Would hide her and would leave no mark:
Black water, smooth above the weir
Like starry velvet in the night,
Though ruffled once, would soon appear
The same as ever to the sight.

"Avon's Harvest" contains a long narrative study of hatred and fear, and a number of poems and sonnets with the accustomed brilliance and at times more than the accustomed involution of thought. The precious kernel is always present.

There remain "Merlin," "Lancelot," and "Roman Bartholow," three long blank verse narratives based upon an embroidery of the situation of the wedded couple and the lover of the wife. In the first, the ancient seer returns from his willing captivity to Vivian in Broceliande, to confess his inability fully to advise Arthur, in the entanglement caused by Lancelot's love for Guinevere. Arthur had previously disregarded Merlin's warnings; nevertheless, the latter, after his return to his amorous exile, is troubled at what he left behind in Camelot,

and sets out to return to the king. The storm has broken, Lancelot has thundered bloodily away to his castle with Guinevere; it is too late. Merlin and Sir Dagonet, the fool, set out over the world together, leaving Vivian abandoned. In the second story, we have the growth of the suspicion of infidelity in the court of the Round Table, the condemnation of Guinevere to death at the pyre, her rescue by Lancelot, his surrender of the unwilling queen to the king, and in the end her rejection of the lover for the religious cell. In "Roman Bartholow," Bartholow, the husband, has been cured of mental breakdown by a mystic friend Penn-Raven, who meanwhile has enjoyed the love of Gabrielle, Bartholow's wife. The lovers quarrel, Gabrielle admits her defection to her husband and drowns herself; the husband, after driving the seductive friend away, is restored to himself by Umfraville, a grotesque fisherman-friend.

So much for the skeleton stories. That the third is kin to the other two is obvious. The situation is the same; Penn-Raven and Umfraville share Merlin's seership, while the latter is somewhat the clown with Dagonet; Gabrielle is placed as was Guinevere, and dies in the river as Elaine, the maid of Astolat, died upon it, for love of Lancelot. We have here three treatments of this triangled tragedy, which indicates its importance as a theme to the author. On it he has spent his most sustained energy. Incidentally, no one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies turns upon this garden variety of theme. Of the three, the modern story is closest to life; it lacks that advertised predestination which takes from the reality of the others. And yet, in its mystic leisureliness, it is hardly successful; it will live more for its jeweled felicities of thought and phrase, than for its story, which is spun out to tiresome interpretation. The

characters speak a highly intellectualized lingo, never heard outside of poetry—in sharp contradistinction to much of Frost.

> Born with a face
> That on a bullfrog would ensure for life
> The lucubrations of a celibate—

whether as zoology or human conversation, what can we say of this? Or of packed cerebration like:

> Less to remembering an obscure monition
> Than to confessing an assured renascence—

which will tend to establish the poet as an over-Browning. But the fragments of insight and beauty!

> His eyes were like two lamps
> Preparing to go out.

> At the window,
> Where the moths plunged and whirred eternally,
> Torn by their own salvation.

> Strange bottles hold God's wine.

> Where summer now lay buried, and the first
> Red leaves of autumn, flying silently,
> Became a scattered silence on the grass.

You will search far in all poetry to find a dozen passages to set beside these three lines.

Nor, as a whole, does "Lancelot" succeed. It has the let-down of most sequels. A labored didacticism owls out of occasional passages, whose least vice is that they are anachronistic:

And how much longer are there to be kings?
When are the millions who are now like worms
To know that kings are worms, if they are worms?

I had a dream
Of a sword over kings, and of a world
Without them.

Compare these with the termination of the following spirited speech of Lancelot's, reminding his queen of the first glimpse of her:

Then a great shout went up
From shining men around me everywhere;
And I remember more fair women's eyes
Than there are stars in heaven, all of them
Thrown on me for a glimpse of that high knight
Sir Lancelot—Sir Lancelot of the Lake.
I saw the faces and I saw not one
To sever a tendril of my integrity;
But I thought once again, to make myself
Believe a silent lie, "God save the king." . . .
I saw your face, and there were no more kings.

There is one lovely couplet toward the close:

He crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling
Away from him like flowers into a grave.

Even with its depressing tempo, this, and much more "Merlin," are preferable in every aspect to Tennyson's blurred tapestry of "Idyls of the King," except as preliminary high school readings.

"Merlin" had the misfortune of receiving its critical baptism from critics apt to scratch the epidermis of poetry, but unable to see down to the heart within. They

scuffed across its surface, and adjudged that it suffered from a traditional treatment; that it raveled off at the end; that it was irritating and tedious. Miss Lowell discovered that it was thirteen hundred lines long: it is some twenty-eight hundred lines long, in point of unimportant fact. Criticism mirrors chiefly the critic. The treatment is fresh and stimulating; the poem is exquisitely shaped and rounded; it is interesting throughout; only that early criticism was irritating and tedious.

Sir Dagonet, the knighted fool, strikes a typical Robinsonian note near the start:

> If you see what's around us every day,
> You need no other showing to go mad.
>
> Time swings
> A mighty scythe, and some day all your peace
> Goes down before its edge like so much clover.

Here is a sample of the "charming, remote, traditional" treatment objected to—Sir Lamorak speaking:

> It's that unwholesome and inclement cub
> Young Modred I'd see first in hell before
> I'd hang too high the Queen or Lancelot;
> The king, if one may say it, set the pace,
> And we've two strapping bastards here to prove it. . . .
> For the stone-chested, helmet-cracking knight
> That you are known to be from Lyonesse
> To northward, Bedivere, you fol-de-rol
> When days are rancid, and you fiddle-faddle
> More like a woman than a man. . . .
> I'll have to tell you, brother Bedivere,
> That crowns and orders, and high palaces, . . .
> Will not go rolling down to hell just yet
> Because a pretty woman is a fool.

—as remote as today, as traditional as tomorrow. Merlin comes upon

> King Arthur, as he paced a lonely floor
> That rolled a muffled echo, as he fancied,
> All through the palace and out through the world.

He has no comfort for the king;

> "But your most violent years are on their way,
> To days, and to a sounding of loud horns
> That are to strike for war."

When Merlin left Arthur to the darkness and the seer's dark words,

> No tide that ever crashed on Lyonesse
> Drove echoes inland that were lonelier
> For widowed ears among the fisher-folk,
> Than for the King were memories tonight
> Of old illusions that were dead for ever.

With admirable technique, the story flashes back to Merlin's first approach to Broceliande:

> Leaves flashed and swung
> Before him in the sunlight; a soft breeze
> Made intermittent whisperings around him
> Of love and fate and danger, and faint waves
> Of many sweetly-stinging fragile odors
> Broke lightly as they touched him.

He gladly exchanges his reins of kingdoms for her lyric wonder:

> It seemed
> A flower of wonder with a crimson stem

Came leaning slowly and regretfully
To meet his will—a flower of change and peril
That had a clinging blossom of warm olive
Half stifled with a tyranny of black,
And held the wayward fragrance of a rose
Made woman by delirious alchemy.

The conversation, of course, is "charming, remote, traditional": Vivian urges.

Go on, and tell me all about the King;
I'll bet the King had warts or carbuncles,
Or something wrong in his divine insides,
To make him wish that Adam had died young.

The poem glows with a sustained beauty that Robinson has achieved rarely elsewhere, mounting at times to ecstasy. The poem rounds back on itself, as a twitching unrest drives Merlin away for the last time, to find that he has come too late to Camelot. The king "he made to be a moral for the speckled ages" is set upon his last battle; and Merlin,

The man who had made other men
As ordinary as arithmetic

accompanied by Sir Dagonet, sets forth across the world.

Fiercer now
The wind was like a flying animal
That beat the two of them incessantly
With icy wings, and bit them as they went.
The rock above them was an empty place
Where neither seer nor fool should view again
The stricken city. Colder blew the wind
Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot.

This poet pays rich fleeting homage to the hour of Shakespeare, of Lincoln, and a dozen other historical figures; he has blown new life into the Arthurian tales, with definite modern overtones of a world breaking up; but his preoccupation is with Tilbury Town. His choice of Camelot instead of Tilbury for the two long narratives is well considered. The poet who accompanies the master poets in choosing a theme for extended treatment from among those ancient tales sieved and hallowed by time more than halves his labor. If he elects a modern story, he must not only give it the same creative energy of treatment, but he must be able to pick among the thousands of mushroom themes the one which time will preserve; otherwise his very story is uninteresting. In "Roman Bartholow," however, he came back to at least a suburb of Tilbury. And Tilbury Town is the town of his youth, that he left in his early twenties. Little of his poetry seems founded on the living of the thirty years that have elapsed since then. His decree that man has failed is based, for its chief support and evidence, upon what he observed in his first score of years, and his subsequent reflections upon that period. Upon the rest he has shut the valves of his attention like stone. Most great poets do not put such a decisive period upon the sights of their youth; their vision is always open. Robinson's trait is a limitation, working toward a narrowed intensity.

It has bothered some commentators that so many of his New England characters have names as odd to it as they would be to old England: Flammonde, Bokardo, Briony, Argan, Ben Trobato, Penn-Raven, Umfraville, Lorraine, Gabrielle. If these are portraits of people remembered, the answer may be as simple as the motive that hides the head of the ostrich in the sand. It may be no more

than the nearest way of disguising the real. The queer-syllabled masks fall easily enough.

It is not needful, however, to explain his black outlook upon man's life by the wrench out of the Puritanism of his early years. Masters has arrived at a kindred mood, without the same definite wrench; Frost, with a much more varied background, has a spirit kith and kin to Robinson's. It is rather the product of the pounding of the harsh matter-of-fact world upon the sensitive soul of the artist. It is the despair of the square peg bruised against the unyielding round hole. His is not the first soul to ache and blacken from this bludgeon pressure; his will not be the last.

In a typical burst of uninspired enthusiasm, Theodore Maynard writes of this poet: "It is certain that something has been left out of Robinson's genius. If he had been able to abandon himself he might have become not merely the greatest poet of America (he has, I think, become that) but one of the half-dozen of the world's greatest poets." His five associates would be perhaps Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, Aeschylus, and the author of Job; and, with this needed abandon, he would then surmount such by no means mediocre singers as Sophocles, Goethe, Pindar, Milton, Sappho, Heine, Shelley, Vergil, Euripides, Spencer, Whitman—the list stretches toward the crack of doom. It is doubtful if all the abandon of a Shelley or a Whitman could have lifted him, with his bleak shriveling mood, so high as he has gone. With a philosophy based upon the single postulate that man has failed, upon a denial at core, the eternal limitations to the highest flight has already been named. Given abandon, he might have sagged to no more than another James Thomson, finding in Gardiner his Tilbury Town of Dreadful Night. Sky and sea are dark and

high enough, night is thrice night, and heaven an iron roof, to him; but the last two lines of Chesterton's—

> Do you have joy without a cause,
> Yea, faith without a hope?

Joy is his snobbish neighbor, and his faith cannot reach the sunlight. From the poet to whom life is dungeons, and whose words photograph this dungeon-life around him, we need not look for wings to split the sky, and fan the embers of the stars. His wings are broken on the bars; the black despair of his heartsong is magnificence enough.

CHAPTER IX

Robert Frost: the Twilight of New England

The poet of America (we share here and elsewhere in the haughty theft of the name of the twin continents, to describe the central third of one of them) must be a multi-visioned person. For America is less a melting pot for the world than the world pulverized, shaken well, and flung broadcast. We have every race in the world here, reduplicated in a thousand little racial clots and eddies. We have Chinatowns from the Golden Gate to Hell Gate, Little Italies from north of Boston to south of New Orleans, Little Jerusalems, Little Hungaries, Little Dublins, Little Africas, and indeed lesser subdivisions of Jewry, Ethiopia, and others. Nor is this all: many of the states have molded their own breed of men; many of the cities even. The eagle vision of a Whitman might catch a high view of the whole, in which the aloof height blurred the unique worldlets to an America unity; but this remained an eagle's-eye vision. For a recognizable portrait of living individuals a different point of view was needed; we have as yet achieved no poet who could be all men, a more multiplex Shakespeare. In default of this, a new localism has had to grow up; and each Notting Hill has produced its own faithful bard. Of the depicters of New England—or rather, of one moribund phase of it—Robert Frost stands beside Robinson.

There was a New England that wrote the Janus slogans of religious intolerance and religious toleration high over the northern gate of the young colonies—a New England born of old England, with no outlander in the woodpile. It was this New England that disputed on even terms with the South the political supremacy of the amateur republic; and that held an eminence in letters, unshaken by the New York wits or the sporadic Poes and Laniers south of the great surveyor's line. That New England died. It died of a transfusion of its best blood to the urgent conquest of the Mid-West and the Far West; it died because its cramped acres were the handy gateway of pre-English Europe, and it was easy to make of Pats and Jeans, wops and Polacks, the hewers of ditches and drawers of burdens—the doers of that dirty work of daily life which is the racial De Leon spring. The drained and reclaimed New England of today has vestiges of the old, as the sand lizard is a vestige of the gigantic saurians—sparse human backwaters starving into the asylum or the cemetery; ingrowing spiritual fossils. It is of this dimming of the old noon that Robert Frost is the laureate.

William Prescott Frost, the poet's father, was born in Kingston, New Hampshire, the ninth generation of his family on New England soil. While teaching school in a Pennsylvania town, he met and married a fellow teacher, Belle Moody, born in Edinburgh of lowland Scotch family. The couple went as far west as was feasible; and on March 26, 1875, their son, the poet, was born in San Francisco. The father had been a New Hampshire Democrat, a Copperhead during the Civil War, who meditated slipping through the lines and joining the gray sons of Marse Robert. Instead, he named the boy Robert Lee Frost. For ten years the boy thrived

in the hectic afterdays of the gold rush, while his father edited a Democratic newspaper. In 1885 the father died; and the widow took the boy back to the nearest relative, his grandfather Frost, who was an overseer in one of the mills at Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Lawrence is a modern New England in small, with a desiccated fringe of the old Yankee strain dying on the outlying farms, and with a large Irish, German, Canadian, and South and Central European majority of population. The town boasts the largest textile mill in the world, and one of the bloodiest textile strikes, with passionate revolutionary leadership and stern suppression at the end. Grammar school and high school days were finished, entitling the boy to admission to Dartmouth College, on the borderland between New Hampshire and Vermont. After a few unhappy months here, he returned suddenly to his grandfather's home in Lawrence, much to that old gentleman's disapproval. The grandson was left to shift for himself; he began the shift by working as bobbin boy in one of the mills, and for four years filled various occupations useful in the sight of the world. During his high school days he had commenced writing verses and submitting them to the magazines, and had sold to *The Independent*. For twenty years his poems made the discouraging rounds of the leading magazines; he acquired little beyond a bulky collection of rejection slips. In 1895, at twenty, he married a former schoolmate, and with her approval moved two years later to Cambridge, where he remained an unassimilated part of Harvard for two years. Back to Lawrence with wife and child; he hoboed, taught school, made shoes, edited a little weekly, and finally in 1900 moved to Derry, in New Hampshire, where his grandfather had purchased him a farm. For five years he cultivated the soil; for

six years more he cultivated the growing minds of the land in the local Pinkerton Academy; for two years more he taught psychology in the Normal School up state at Plymouth. Surfeited at last, he succeeded in selling the farm, and, in 1912, removed with his family to England.

The "new era" in American poetry cracked its shell just after his departure; England was already in the throes of the Early Georgians. Frost attended the London gatherings of these young enthusiasts, went home, and wrote his own kind of poetry. In 1913 his first volume, *A Boy's Will,* was brought out by a London publisher. England was kind to it; and the author moved out to the small suburb of Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire; and then, stirred by economic pinching, in 1914 leased a little farm outside Little Iddens, in Gloucestershire. His success with the soil was meager; but his near neighbors were the poets Lascelles Abercrombie and Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. In 1914 appeared his second book, *North of Boston,* from the same publishing house. England was wholly favorable; and America with provincial impetuosity welcomed to its academic bosom this pet of overseas critics, whom for twenty years it had spurned with withering unanimity. The poet returned to America, in 1916 published *Mountain Interval,* and in 1923 *New Hampshire.* He was appointed to a position in the English department of Amherst College, and is still in collegiate work. These four slim books represent his whole gathered product.

What will we find in his work? Childhood memories of the golden turmoil of San Francisco; remembered tales of Southern soldiers, and Scotch tales borrowed from his mother; the mill squalor of Lawrence, multi-faced and multi-tongued, with its underground simmer

of revolt, that broke out into open strife about the time when he crossed the sea; the chilly exuberance of Dartmouth, the chillier aloofness of Harvard, the glamor of storied England; with just a touch of the vanishing New England which bore his forebears—all this we might expect. None of this we find, except the last note. All of these tongues are dumb in his lines, except the doddering senility and decadence of the land that fathered eleven generations of Frosts.

A Boys' Will is a subjective self-portrait of the author; the table of contents is tied together with an affected running gloss, emphasizing the intended unity and completeness of the likeness. What sort of boy is this, who utters his tardy will at thirty-eight? Byron, Shelley, Keats, Poe, Lanier, many other sky-treading singers had sung their long song and burned out, by the time this San Francisco son of New England fathers brought out this delayed etching of his withdrawing self. The first poem sets the key. Of the trees he says:

> I should not be withheld but that some day
> Into their vastness I should steal away,
> Fearless of ever finding open land,
> Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.
>
> I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
> Or those should not set forth upon my track
> To overtake me, who should miss me here
> And long to know if still I held them dear.
>
> They would not find me changed from him they knew—
> Only more sure of all I thought was true.

The last poem in his third volume, *The Sound of the Trees*, says more magically only the same thing. From the start his choice is to flee city, town, village, open land,

highway, to lose himself in a world of trees, in which today he could not help but be utterly lost. The form is unique—the frame of a sonnet, with couplet rhyming. And the poet is already able to write—

> Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

Brooding observation, rendered faithfully and exquisitely —these are the gifts of this poet for whom the slow glass pours the tardy sand. The second poem elects the dead and buried as his sweet companions—not in a sense more morbid than that his happiness is to be found with only tombstone memories of life, grass-etched and flower-sweetened.

> Not yesterday I learned to know
> The love of bare November days
> Before the coming of the snow

he says next. He admits his small family to dwell beside him, and feels he can give to others

> A dole of bread, a purse,
> A heartfelt prayer for the poor of God,
> Or for the rich a curse

but not haven to a sorrowing visitor from the world without. His mood persists in sober beauty:

> A tree beside the wall stands bare,
> But a leaf that lingered brown,
> Disturbed, I doubt not, by my thought,
> Comes softly rattling down.

> I end not far from my going forth
> By picking the faded blue
> Of the last remaining aster flower
> To carry again to you.

This is all there is of life to him: of New England life, which is in his song all life. His eyes are too old to look for comfort from the stars:

> And yet with neither love nor hate
> Those stars like some snow-white
> Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
> Without the gift of sight.

There is an increasing sense of poetic excellence in the book. He begs the storm to take him to it:

> But whate'er you do tonight,
> Bathe my window, make it flow,
> Melt it as the ices go;
> Melt the glass, and leave the sticks
> Like a hermit's crucifix;
> Burst into my narrow stall;
> Swing the picture on the wall;
> Run the rattling pages o'er;
> Scatter poems on the floor;
> Turn the poet out of door.

Picture, not pictures . . . like the farmhouse that rejected the book-agent: "We've got a book." He has all of Burns's love of tender things, as when he sings of a jewel-small meadow of rose pogonias—

> We raised a simple prayer
> Before we left the spot,
> That in the general mowing
> That place might be forgot;
> Or if not all so favored,
> Obtain such grace of hours,
> That none should mow the grass there
> While so confused with flowers.

He takes his worn books of old golden poetry out into the orchard world to freshen them; and in charming whimsey he says:

> They leave us so to the way we took,
> As two in whom they were proved mistaken,
> That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook,
> With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,
> And *try* if we cannot feel forsaken.

"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows," he concludes out of his farm toil. This is the word of the farming poet, not of the nodder in the punishing treadmill of a specialized industrial plant. The fact is no dream there. Identifying himself as Pan—and what a somber, old-young, stooped deity he is!—he finds no tune that he can play. Modern science he sees as a wallowing demon, who jeers at him. "Revelation" paints him as he is:

> 'Tis pity if the case require
> (Or so we say) that in the end
> We speak the literal to inspire
> The understanding of a friend.
>
> But so with all, from babes that play
> At hide-and-seek to God afar,
> So all who hide too well away
> Must speak and tell us where they are.

This is his imperative for singing from his hidden woodland crypt. This is the leisurely boy who gives us his vision of the fall of something darker than snow over New England.

North of Boston he calls "a book of people." Four of the poems are lyrics, with the poet speaking; he is present in twice as many more; in only five is he merely

narrator. The poet commences by going out to simple farmyard tasks, to Spring wall-mending, to the end of apple-picking, to follow a small bird in the snow, to return after the snow-locked farmhouses are dark. He gives us the mountain that is the all of a dying township, the minister's comments on a sweet old-fashioned woman, the family that makes out with berry-picking; he sketches the embryo of love between distant cousins, the irk of sharing a hotel room with an unknown jovial drunkard, the penalty visited on the boastful farmer during hay-gathering. He tells the tragedies of the man crippled in the sawmill, of the unsettled farmhand who comes back to die, of women who go mad with overwork and with brooding over the home-burial of an only child, of near-madness pursuing an eloping woman fearful of her husband's vengeance, of an escape from an unmarried tangle. "The gayest things in Robert Frost are anything else but gay," as Chesterton might say; and the saddest things are doubly sad for the sad-eyed man who tells them. "Mending Wall" is typical and searching—a portrait from life of the bewildered poet looking on the ancient relic that was once thriving life:

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
> That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
> And makes gaps even two can pass abreast
> The work of hunters is another thing:
> I have come after them and made repair
> Where they have left not one stone on stone,
> But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
> To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
> No one has seen them made or heard them made,
> But at spring mending-time we find them there.
> I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
> And on a day we meet to walk the line

And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Every word in this is precious. The first line contains the hardest lesson that man has to learn, which he is far from guessing yet. The interpretation—

> He moves in darkness as it seems to me
> Not of woods only and the shade of trees

is immense in its evocation. This is a great new note in English poetry.

"The Death of the Hired Man" is one of the rounded stories, lifted by instances of his finest beauty of phrase:

> Part of a moon was falling down the west,
> Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
> Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw
> And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
> Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
> Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
> As if she played unheard the tenderness
> That wrought on him beside her in the night.

"The Mountain" is a leisurely gem, "A Hundred Collars" and "The Code" desiccated and typical humor of the land. "The Black Cottage" contains one keen bit of vision:

> Strange how such innocence gets its own way.
> I shouldn't be surprised if in this world
> It were the force that would at last prevail.

One outshining many, it should be said. "Blueberries" falters, especially in the inept meter; "A Servant to Servants" is harrowing without poetic crystallization. "After Apple Picking" is one of the exquisite things throughout. But "Mending Wall," and the two great tragedies, "Home Burial" and "The Fear," are the crests of the book. They are dialogs, and cause the wonder that Frost has not yet shaped some of his sharp material into out-and-out dramatic form. In the present form they are powerful enough: overpowering tragedies of solitary lives.

The third volume is a compression of the earlier two, with the high art lifted further. The opening "The

Road Not Taken" tells his whole story, in his finest phrasing:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference.

The wood was yellow, not green, when he made his choice: and yellow alters soon to brown, and brown to white. This books lifts the lyric felicities of the first volume to a far higher point, as in "A Patch of Old Snow:"

> It is speckled with grime as if
> Small print overspread it,
> The news of a day I've forgotten—
> If I ever read it.

He has not read it: he sees and says how little the day around him compares, to him, to the thickening twilight he must sing. "Birches" is a woodland memory of his solitary childhood, of exceptional charm. One picture in "Pea Brush" is memorable—the piled boughs, which were—

> Small good to anything growing wild,
> They were crooking many a trillium
> That had budded before the boughs were piled,
> And since it was coming up had to come.

With hardly an exception, each lyric in the book is memorable. A compression of his tragedies speaks in "Out, Out——"

> The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
> And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
> Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.

And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood behind them in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At that word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Here is the realism Professor Pitkin asked; and it is a magnificent product of a sensitive, observing spirit. As he began on his first page, he closes on the last here, in the eerie lyric "The Sound of the Trees":

They are that that talks of going
But never gets away;
And that talks no less for knowing,

As it grows wiser and older,
That now it means to stay.
My feet tug at the floor
And my head sways to my shoulder
Sometimes when I watch trees sway,
From the window or the door.
I shall set forth for somewhere,
I shall make the reckless choice
Some day when they are in voice
And tossing so as to scare
The white clouds over them on.
I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace-Notes is an odd yet still worthy addition to the poet's song. First of all, the scheme is odd: a lumbering whimsey born far below the hill-line of poetry. The title piece is less a poem than a bit of meditative fooling. The verses that follow do not, in the large, deepen in any particular the poet's singing: what they do is to say the lesser things doubtless held in mind from the first, but laid aside as more tentative or less conceivable. Where he was once lifting stones and picking apples and blueberries as big as the end of your thumb, he is now gathering dead leaves:

And bags full of leaves
Are light as balloons. . . .

I may load and unload
Again and again
Till I fill the whole shed,
And what have I then?

Next to nothing for weight;
And since they grow duller
From contact with earth,
Next to nothing for color.

Next to nothing for use.
But a crop is a crop,
And who's to say where
The harvest shall stop?

New Hampshire preaches the reverse of the healthy lesson, "the trial by market everything must come to":

The having anything to sell is what
Is the disgrace in man or state or nation.

The economic reversion, perhaps to a charitable anarchy, is an interesting stage. In the same poem creeps in a line in which the poet sees himself already dead and buried:

We both of us turned over in our graves.

"The Census-Taker" is a cheerless picture of the arid New England field; and who but this poet ploughs it?

The melancholy of having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.

"The Star-Splitter," an odd tale of a man who burned down his house to buy a telescope, is told with spots of the homely beauty of his better narratives, though county road puns slip queerly in. The effect of the stories is that they are largely pointless: which merely points to the fact that he is the unleafed laureate of a people living and dying pointlessly. "The Witch of Coos" is a weird mixture—tepidly interesting, if authentic, but utterly below the rollicking greatness of "Tam o' Shanter." That the old magic can still flash is sometimes evident:

Yet oh! the tempting flatness of a book,
To send it sailing out the attic window
Till it caught the wind, and, opening out its covers,
Tried to improve on sailing like a tile

By flying like a bird (silent in flight,
But all the burden of its body song),
Only to tumble like a stricken bird,
And lie in stones and bushes unretrieved.

The recurrent futility of things. . . . Odd, quaint, that is the effect of the whole: the disused graveyard fooled into believing that men have ceased to die. "Good-bye and Keep Cold" is a faint symbol of the land's self, or the poet's self, in dreadful premature self-burial; "A Brook in the City" sharpens the theme:

The brook was thrown
Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone
In fetid darkness still to live and run—
And all for nothing it had ever done
Except forget to go in fear perhaps.
No one would know except for ancient maps
That such a brook ran water. But I wonder
If from its being kept forever under
The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from both work and sleep.

"So at a knock," he says again,

I emptied my cage
To hide in the world
And alter with age.

The forest of the world now, the crypt under stone, rather than the lost trail among trees: but one is as lost as the other. Elinor Wylie lifts a note of cousin tragedy. Frost will persist, as the exquisite beauty of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" promises:

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

In the land he would elect, there is no farmhouse near; the woods are lovely, dark and deep. But there is the promise to live: and still miles to go. With all the colorful contacts of his youth, and his later life, he has never outgrown the Minerva maturity of his theme for singing: the New England that is dead, the New England of Frosts dead and long loosened dust, whose voice he is of crabbed dusty beauty.

Whitman labored diligently to elide the accustomed poeticisms, the asphodel rubber-stamps, from his verse. This was a negative virtue—a virtue of omission. When is came to electing a vocabulary, he chose the usual prose vocabulary—the written speech that we find in the great fiction, historical writing, and essays. It is true that he muddied the spring a trifle with an affectation of foreign word-tags; but in the main he was faithful to his choice. Robinson followed him in all but the exotic eccentricity. Robert Frost, with no fanfare of trumpets but with arduous application, has discovered and brought to poetry another speech—a less artificial one, a more living one—the speech that falls from the lips of living man.

In *A Boy's Will* he was fumbling toward this utterance. It is caught in

> On that disused and forgotten road
> That has no dust-bath now for the toad.

> And yet, in view of how many things,
> As sweet companions as might be had.

His contribution includes not only the words, but the very rhythms of speech. This first volume has remembered excrescences like *full many a time, fain to list, winds do blow, cag-ed the orchard white, maidens pale . . . whose garments trail, wist, alway, hie me, 'neath, 'wildered, whelming, amain, bruit, didst, wended me,* and even *asphodel.* But they are small change in a pocket full of bills. Even in *North of Boston* an occasional poeticism still smoulders, as in—

> And wait to watch the water clear, I may.
>
> "But little."
>
> Something you somehow haven't to deserve.
>
> The blue's but a mist.

A number of responses in the blueberry poem sag in this fashion; and the use of *deploy* is written prose, rather than speech. Consider too the talk of the drunken man in "A Hundred Collars." It seems to smack of the desk rather than the ginny tongue; which may put us on the trail of a further limitation of just what speech Frost uses. One critic has pointed out that there is no dialect here. More than this, there is by no means the general contraction and elision that accompanies the usual spoken

word. The speech of Frost is less an accurate transcript of the speech he has heard, than of his own oral speech; a speech rooted in childhood lessons from the lips of others, with book-talk grafted on it, and corrected at maturity by aural observation. It is a clear, precise, accurate speech, lacking the embellishment of the written word no less than the tang and twist of the undiluted Yankee tongue. It is much to have rendered correctly his own speech; but it is not yet the speech of the men and women he lets speak. It rises to a new and authentic beauty again and again:

> I'm going out to fetch the little calf
> That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
> It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
> I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

> Woodville's a place of shrieks and wandering lamps
> And cars that shook and rattle—and *one* hotel.

There is the horse—

> She's got so she turns in at every house
> As if she had some sort of curvature.

> No, from the time when one is sick to death,
> One is alone, and he dies more alone.
> Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
> But before one is in it, their minds are turned
> And making the best of their way back to life
> And living people, and things they understand.

> The warping boards pull out their own old nails
> With none to tread and put them in their place.

Of "all men are created equal,"

But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years,
Each age will have to reconsider it.

Where an irregular sun-bordered cloud
Darkly advanced with a perpetual dagger
Flickering across its bosom.

As pale and dim as a match-flame in the sun.

The slow smokeless burning of decay.

And, from the third book, we have the great line:

The trial by market everything must come to.

And other lines almost as noteworthy:

All out of doors looked darkly in at him
Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.

We love the things we love for what they are.

The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

It is of this diminished thing, New England, that Frost has made his poetry.

His speech rhythm is more fluidic and yielding than we are accustomed to in formal verse. He makes nothing of having a foot in a blank verse line, where the iamb is the norm, composed of three short syllables and a long —an aberration anathema to strait-jacket verse, and rich with that expanding technique that makes de la Mare's "The Listeners" one of the marvelous poems of this generation. It reminds us afresh that the greatest

poetry lies in its rhythm between the scattering rhythm of prose and the tom-tom beat which is regular metric verse. That highest emotional utterance of words which we call poetry occupies a narrow crest, from a technical standpoint, above the shaggy multiplicity of rhythm of prose in the one valley, and above the ordered checkerboard of metric verse in the other. Over-looseness of rhythm destroys the spell, over-tightness is just as fatal to it. The great masters found this rough eminence; and Frost has found it.

What must be said about the limitation of his vision? Robinson decrees that man has failed; but he limited his evidence largely to the Maine town of his rearing. Frost shows the same human dry-rot, less as a decree than as a confession. To do this, he had to shut his eyes and ears and tongue to the bustle of San Francisco; the vast chaotic purgatory of the mill town, Lawrence, with its Babel babble; the cloistered exuberance of Hanover and Cambridge; the inoffensive studied glamor of England. He may have felt that he owed this to the land which bore him, to erect a monument to its death less crumbling than marble. In some obscure fashion, he is possessed by the land and his forebears, and all of his singing comes from this. From these witnesses who use the large end of the telescope to look through, we need not decide that man has failed. To see rightly their share in American poetry, the small end of the largest instrument is none too small.

CHAPTER X

Edgar Lee Masters: Caliban upon Helicon

The list of English laureates includes the names of T. Shadwell, Nahum Tate, Rose, Eusden, Colley Cibber, Whitehead, Warton, and Henry James Pye. These official nightingales punctuate such poets as Ben Jonson, Dryden, Wordsworth, and Tennyson upon the same list; and they earn mention in any chapter treating of this royal recognition of poetry. We have no laureates in America—except that some Western state legislature has elevated John G. Neihardt to this rank; and a neighboring state the well-known Mrs. —— the name escapes us, but surely you recall it—a Sweet Singer of her native state, whose poems have appeared in all its village papers; and a few others. Though we have no formal laureate, there is always an unofficial ranking amounting to nearly the same thing, conferred upon what the critic-led public regards as the leading ten or a dozen singers. Among these are some whose names zenith high about their worths; and, despite his undoubted ability at times, Edgar Lee Masters is one of these.

Poets have an ally in Time, who will soon enough scythe off mere metrical weeds, that the poetic grain may come to its slow harvest. But Time in return prefers co-operation from the poet; and unfortunate is that singer who does not hold in his equipment something of the critic's discrimination. A. E. Housman

is the type of poet who aids the old gentleman by a thorough weeding before publication. Whitman let much grow beside the high green of poetry; but it was less weeds than enthusiastic shoots of original thought. Masters is one singularly lacking the ability to weigh the worthy and the unworthy, to retain the one and reject the other; a sincere admiration for his vigor of spirit, his healthy pioneering, and an occasional felicity of word usage, cannot blind the vision to the multiplying Niagaras of worthlessness that he continues to father. Few current poets have sagged lower, and oftener. Yet one book of his represents everything in modern poetry to thousands; to thousands more this book has been the stimulus to search further, into fairer fields. This book may live, to use Arthur Symons' fine phrase, by a kind of bulk, because there is in it something living, which refuses to go out. It is a pity that his excellent material must traipse about in such shoddy. The attempt to make poetry of this material earns for him an inclusion which little of his actual singing justifies.

He was born at Garnet, Kansas, on August 23, 1869, of stock which pioneered from England to Massachusetts, then to Virginia, to Tennessee, to Illinois. His paternal grandparents died at the hale ages of ninety-two and ninety-six. On his mother's side he was connected with the Putnams and other New England celebrities. David Masters, father of the poet, defied his father in electing law instead of farming; Edgar Lee Masters was directed into the law by his father, in spite of his desire to choose literature. In the end, as is often the case with persons not broken in the process, he has gone his desired way. The poet engaged in the practice of law in Chicago, for nine years as the partner of Clarence Darrow, distinguished radical practitioner. During this

time he was writing constantly and publishing, from time to time before 1915, six mediocre volumes of verse, drama, and essays. In that year appeared *Spoon River Anthology*. The next year two additional volumes of verse were published; since then he has brought out four more, and two book-length stories. During the years before *Spoon River* he also wrote eight unpublished prose plays, hundreds of poems, and some miscellaneous work. There was little in this of enduring value.

Spoon River Anthology contains more than two hundred epitaphs, taken from the cemetery of a dying mid-Western village. The author says that it was inspired by the Greek Anthology, which is one of the treasures of Hellenic culture. Two hundred and more of these villagers speak from the tombstone their retrospect of life. Their lips are unsealed, less to deeper comprehension, than to the confession of what in life they did not dare say. Here is a typical trilogy of interrelated stories. In "Tom Merritt," the husband observes the back door shut as he enters the front, and a man slinking back of the smokehouse into the lot, and so across the field. He means to kill him on sight;

> But that day, walking near Fourth Bridge,
> Without a stick or a stone at hand,
> All of a sudden, I saw him standing,
> Scared to death, holding his rabbits,
> And all I could say was, "Don't, Don't, Don't,"
> And he aimed and fired at my heart.

In Mrs. Merritt's story, she tells how she stands dumb before the jury, cowed because popular sentiment was against her in this murder of her husband because her nineteen-year old lover had killed him, even though she had said often:

"Go away, Elmer, go far away,
I have maddened your brain with the gift of my body;
You will do some terrible thing."
And just as I feared, he killed my husband;
With which I had nothing to do, before God!
Silent for thirty years in prison!
And the iron gates of Joliet
Swung as the gray and silent trusties
Carried me out in a coffin.

A much jollier strain is in the story of the lover, Elmer Karr. He attributes to the love of God the forgiving natures of the people of Spoon River, who forgive his offense against Thomas Merritt, and the murder:

Oh, loving hearts that took me in again
When I returned from fourteen years in prison!
Oh, helping hands that in the church received me,
And heard with tears my penitent confession,
Who took the sacrament of bread and wine!
Repent, ye living ones, and rest with Jesus.

This is typical of the book. These three sketches, properly amplified, might make an effective short story; they are singularly skeleton-like here. We have no background whatever for the husband; he suspects, he sees, he is shot. We learn nothing appreciable of the wife, except that she spent thirty years unjustly in prison. There is some distinction in the satire of the third piece; though it is laid on in inartistic thickness. The first two are little more than the headlines of a sensational, sordid small-town murder; the third is the ironic side-slant of the mind restive at conventional standards of morality. There is no poetry in the first two; there is a low type of bitter contemplative poetry in the third. There is nothing distinctive even about the prosy phrasing; parts

are incredibly hackneyed: "I meant to kill him on sight," "All of a sudden I saw him standing," "I have maddened your brain with the gift of my body"; parts are merely flat. Frost uses actual speech words and rhythms; but he has subjected this to an inner criticism which rejects the merely unimportant, and gives a product actual and yet fresh. Masters, judging by his product, merely writes on and on. If this were all art is, a phonographic record of a man's daily conversation would be worthy poetry or prose. This is the culm-pile of art; the black diamonds are another matter.

As for the form, consider especially these lines in the third:

Toward me/who wronged/the bed/of Thom-/as Merritt
Oh, lov-/ing hearts/that took/me in/again
When I/returned/from four-/teen years/in prison
Oh, help-/ing hands/that in/the church/received me,
And heard/with tears/my peni-/tent/confession,
Who took/the sac-/rament/of bread/and wine!
Repent/ye liv-/ing ones,/and rest/with Jesus.

The first two lines are slightly irregular; the fourth is three iambic feet. Seven out of ten are in unbroken iambics, except in four end feet an allowed feminine ending. This, but for the permissible final syllable, is exactly the meter of "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day"; as monotonous, inartistic, and, in the highest sense of the term, unpoetic. Another matter is important here. We know that Gray intended his technique; that in large measure Whitman did also. There is a strong suspicion that Masters did not; for he had said that the publication of free verse in Harriet Monroe's magazine *Poetry* inspired the technique of the Anthol-

ogy. It—to judge by "Elmer Karr"—is as free as a penitentiary. Some are more regular, in that not a line escapes the pattern. Others are much looser—but without the polyrhythmic poetry of Whitman, as a rule; in its stead we have the flat variety of prose rhythm predominating. A study of this and all of his subsequent books indicates that Masters is the poorest craftsman of any position writing verse today. A study of any or all of his verse reveals this: and when an educated man shows by his work that he knows little of the elementary material of his trade, it is a serious reproach.

We do not quarrel with the number of his women whose chief occupation is sex, in its more sordid manifestations; nor with the percentage of violent deaths among the men. This is probably an exaggerated view; but literature requires a selective exaggeration. Theatrical make-up, seen close, is a grotesque perversion of life; seen across the footlights, its exaggeration allows for the perspective, and mirrors life. So with poetic exaggeration. If this had been done with skill, whether in prose fiction or poetry, it would be entitled to endure; but skill is the outstanding lack. Robinson in "Richard Cory" and the rest showed how a poet handles such themes; Masters shows in two hundred and more places how one not a poet—except in rare flashes—can mishandle it. When he becomes regular, he achieves:

> She took my strength by minutes,
> She took my life by hours,
> She drained me like a fevered moon
> That saps the spinning world.
> The days went by like shadows,
> The minutes wheeled like stars.
> She took the pity from my heart,
> And made it into smiles.

This opens "Fletcher McGee." The first two lines are inoffensive and might be true; but there is neither truth nor inspiration in the figure of a fevered moon sapping the spinning world. The jumbled ideas are (1) she is a fevered satellite to her husband, as the moon is to the world; and (2) she saps or drains him, perhaps as a different kind of parasite. But the scrambling of the figures makes flat nonsense. The fifth line is passable and usual; "the minutes wheeled like stars" probably means that the minutes passed slowly: it is doubtful if a more awkward and unsuitable metaphor could have been discovered, without some serious pondering. The last two lines are obscure and unimportant. Apparently it does not mean the obvious thing, that she took all human pity out of her husband's heart, and smiled at her theft; instead, the later lines indicate that Masters meant that she drove the pity out of the husband's heart by her parasitism, and he smiled in bitter perception of her evil rôle. But this is not subtlety of phrasing; it is slovenly phrasing. The totality nears nothing.

There are stronger strains, especially in the satiric. "Daisy Fraser," the prostitute, is one of the most effective:

> Did you ever hear of the Circuit Judge
> Helping anyone except the "Q" railroad,
> Or the bankers? Or did Rev. Peet or Rev. Sibley
> Give any part of their salary, earned by keeping still,
> Or speaking out as the leaders wished them to do,
> To the building of the water works?
> But I—Daisy Fraser, who always passed
> Along the streets through rows of nods and smiles
> And coughs and words such as "there she goes,"
> Never was taken before Justice Arnett
> Without contributing ten dollars and costs
> To the school fund of Spoon River!

Suppose this were set up as prose:

> Did you ever hear of the Circuit Judge helping anyone except the "Q" railroad, or the bankers? Or did Rev. Peet or Rev. Sibley give any part of their salary, earned by keeping still, or speaking out as the leaders wished them to do, to the building of the water works? But I—Daisy Fraser, who always passed along the streets through rows of nods and smiles and coughs and words such as "there she goes," never was taken before Justice Arnett without contributing ten dollars and costs to the school fund of Spoon River!

These unpleasant things about the village are doubtless true; we react as strongly against them as Masters can. As stated, it might be the indignant statement of a prostitute more intelligent than usual before a sociological committee, or before a judge tolerant enough to listen to her. But it is offered as poetry. One critic shortsightedly says, "In all these excerpts, it is easy to see where the element of poetry has strengthened and vitalized the conception. . . . The divisions of these lines was similarly of benefit to the reader. They arrested the eye; they marked out, with dramatic effect, the sudden turn for the mind; they supplied a certain music to an often unmusical setting." What is the "element" of poetry referred to? Marianne Moore, as we shall see when we come to the "Others" group, similarly sets up sheer prose in apparent verse: but that does not and cannot make poetry of it. The "Ode to a Grecian Urn" would be no less poetry if printed as prose; just as early inscriptions left no spaces between words, without thereby subtracting an element from their prose or poetry. There are two essential elements in poetry: on the side of content, that it must express ideas which arouse high and noble emotions, or their opposites; on the side of technique,

that it must be in musical words—in a rhythm tending toward unity rather than toward variety, the latter being the rhythm of prose. Rhyme, alliteration, and other devices are not fundamental, but ornamental. With them, and without either of the elements, we have verse or prose, but never poetry. A division of prose into short lines cannot supply music to an unmusical setting, as Mr. Untermeyer claims. Prose it is, and prose it remains.

"Daisy Fraser" is superficial prose vehemence; it possesses an obvious vitality, and says quite artlessly something much worth saying. Lucius Atherton, the "toothless, discarded, rural Don Juan"; Blind Jack, the fiddler; Editor Whedon, the journalistic prostitute and worse; Eugene Carman, the "damned old thing"; Hortense Robbins, the society lady; Enoch Dunlap, the discredited reform leader; Harry Williams, the soldier pawn; Lucinda Matlock, a drawing from the life of his grandmother—these are sharp human portraits. "Anne Rutledge" has the music which "Daisy Fraser" lacked:

> Out of me unworthy and unknown
> The vibrations of deathless music;
> "With malice toward none, with charity for all."
> Out of me the forgiveness of millions toward millions,
> And the beneficent face of a nation
> Shining with justice and truth.
>
> It ends,
>
> Bloom forever, O Republic,
> From the dust of my bosom!

It is a pity that the "face of a nation Shining with justice and truth" is by no means a true picture. Justice and truth are things to work toward, rather than to arrive

at. There was no justice—full justice—to the ex-slaveholders, or to the Negroes liberated, abandoned so soon, and permitted to slip into more than a half century of near-slavery and worse; and truth has by no means taken up her dwelling among us. But the music is stately and poetic, and points to what he might have done and should have done throughout.

Masters again falls below the artistic, in his inclusion of some of the unneeded soil of sex relationships. There may be those content, as admirers of realism, to read "Georgine Sand Miner" and similar treatments; but there are those who felt a regret at the inartistic use of material which needed especially a careful and skilful hand. The remembered classics slip in by the back door with ineffective insistence:

> Reading in Ovid the sorrowful story of Itys,
> Son of the love of Tereus and Procne, slain
> For the guilty passion of Tereus for Philomela,
> The flesh of him served to Tereus by Procne.

Phrases like "guilty passion" are unutterably hackneyed. He approaches the conversational too nearly, as a rule; at times he errs by swinging to the opposite extreme, with old echoes like "But what think you," "I hid me in a corner," "save for a bitter wind," "ye living ones," "Lo! a new generation of girls," "where sang the lark," to name only a few. And, low as some of the portraits sag, the concluding "Spooniad" is far worse—a poor parody of the epic style, that is neither humorous nor well wrought.

Spoon River achieved great popularity at once. This vogue was not due to its poetry; for its few grains are scattered in several carloads of prose. It owed its wide reception to the story quality of the portraits, abetted by

the treatment of sexual complications. Main Street found the book stimulating. Every detail of it is probably accurate, although the emphasis is not always just. It is conceived in prose, and dedicated to backyard gossip. This has its value, in a land tongue-tied with Puritanism; but it is more antidote than art. It should remain as a storehouse of plots for subsequent prose and poetic development. If it remains as an accepted example of the poetry of today, it will be a persisting proof of our poetic ineptitude and poverty.

The craze for the book, and its ill-considered critical adulation, unfortunately for the poet, led him to believe that he was already accomplished as poet and philosopher. Two volumes appeared the next year. One contained the lovely "Silence"; the rest of the book was filled with verses—let us hope, juvenile leftovers—of the style of:

> Then uprose brave Sir Launcelot
> And there did mount his steed,
> And hastened to a pleasant town
> That stood in knightly need;

and of the supposedly modern mood:

> And now the rows of windows showing laces,
> Silks, draperies and furs and costly vases,
> Watches and mirrors, silver cups and mugs,
> Emeralds, diamonds, Indian, Persian rugs,
> Hats, velvets, silver buckles, ostrich-plumes,
> Drugs, violet water powder and perfumes

and so on in endless cataloging, like a lesser rhymed Walt Whitman Sears-Roebucking over the cosmos. We much prefer Arthur Guiterman's lighter version—

Of laces at Macy's, of thimbles at Gimbels, of urns at Stern's and churns at Hearn's, of axes at Saks's, gold eagles at Siegels

and later on:

Mind the door! Eighth floor!—Iron-heaters, carpet-beaters; negligees, lacquer trays; princesse slips, ostrich tips; . . . broilers, oilers; puzzles, muzzles; pins, tins; nibs, bibs; chains, canes; balls, shawls; dotted veils, percales, wooden pails, Special Sales; New books, view books; sets of Gibbons, SILK RIBBONS!

Guiterman has arrived somewhere, at least. In the next book, there are ups and downs, oftener the latter; the sagging continues. "Toward the Gulf," fourth in the new dispensation, contains this scientific fiddle-faddle in the attire of poetry:

> And now, remember
> Mercier's analysis of heredity:
> Besides direct transmission of unstable
> Nervous systems, there remains the law
> Hereditary of sanguinity.
> Then here's another matter: Parents may
> Have normal nervous systems, yet produce
> Children of abnormal nerves and minds,
> Caused by unsuitable sexual germs.

Do not think that Masters is the only poet who sags. Here are lines from another songster:

> 'Tis said a child was in her womb,
> As now to any eye was plain;
> She was with child, and she was mad;
> Yet often she was sober sad
> From her exceeding pain.
> Oh me! ten thousand times I'd rather
> That he had died, that cruel father! . . .

No more I know, I wish I did,
And I would tell it all to you:
For what became of this poor child
There's none that ever knew:
And if a child was born or no,
There's no one that could ever tell;
And if 'twas born alive or dead,
There's no one knows, as I have said:
But some remember well
That Martha Ray about this time
Would up the mountain often climb.

Of course, this rhymes and tinkles along; but the trivial telling, the platitudes, the repetitions—would you ever grant such a versifier any considerable place in our poetry? The name of the author is William Wordsworth. You can imagine his lofty station beside Nahum Tate and Henry James Pye, his fellow laureates, if this had been his usual singing: but this is his forgotten aberration, and he is remembered for a different, greater song.

The lines quoted above from Masters may be an acceptable clinical lecture, as the title of the verses indicates; but they are not and cannot be poetry. Take two passages of real beauty, for comparison, from a man who is obviously a poet:

Yet am I blind to you? Let me confess
You are the world's whole cycle in yourself:
You can be summer rich and luminous;
You can be autumn, mellow, mystical;
You can be winter with a cheerful hearth;
You can be March, bitter, bright, and hard,
Pouring sharp sleet, and showering cutting hail;
You can be April of the flying cloud,
And intermittent sun and musical air.

Consider the haunting music of those last two exquisite lines; or this freer passage—

When the sea has devoured the ships,
And the spires and the towers
Have gone back to the hills,
And all the cities
Are one with the plains again,
And the beauty of bronze
And the beauty of steel
Are blown over silent continents,
As the desert sand is blown—
My dust with yours forever.

Could you ever mistake genuine poetry like this, with the work of Masters?

The last two selections are from "Toward the Gulf," by Edgar Lee Masters.

We have here, then, the case of a man who is a poet; but is so lacking in discrimination, so remiss in his self-criticism, that he emits page after page of heavy near-scientific and near-philosophic twaddle, under the impression that it is poetry; and only rarely lets the tongue of wonder speak. The book as a whole is execrable, whether it be for the poor rewritings of Vachel's Lindsay's most rickety mood—

Where are the cabalists, the insidious committees,
The panders who betray the idiot cities,
For miles and miles toward the prairie sprawled,
Ignorant, soul-less, rich,
Smothered in fumes of pitch?

alone, or wedded to the worst of Browning, in another volume:

Then the pastor said: Talk of the gallows
Is just the thing, for it's righteous malice;
And we need hearts with piety callous
For work like this, I might say salus

Populi, but bright-eyed Alice
Can help us in this matter kinetic
Who has grown psychic and grown prophetic;

—whether it be tales of abnormal love, like "St. Deseret," or nine pages proceeding,

Because thou wast most delicate,
A woman fair for man to see,
The earth did compass thy estate,
Thou didst hold life and death in fee,
And every soul did bend the knee;

—whether it be the pathetic sonnet "France," with *did rave, didst burst, amaranth,* and its exclamatory erysipelas at the start; or unsublimated fleshly verse like "Canticle of the Race"; or the noisome eroticism of "Widow La Rue," consecrated to a conscious naughtiness and dedicated to bluggy melodrama. The book cannot be saved by a few good lines in the bagnio "Dialogue at Perko's."

"Starved Rock" is, if anything, worse as a volume, with lines as fascinating as "Oh well! Oh hell! We must be heroic." "The Open Sea" contains the Brutus idea developed down the ages, with a technique as modern as:

Fort Sumter leave alone!

I have an oath in Heaven registered
The Union to preserve, protect, defend;
They have no oath the Union to destroy.

I will the door unlock.

If he would only this eschew and this elide! But he gives us one hundred and sixty-two pages of it. This is

followed by a flippant rewrite of parts of the New Testament, and other verses that limp and falter. The standard reaches the nadir.

Domesday Book was accepted by even academic critics of standing as an epic work. It is vaguely epic in intent: to give us a spiritual census of America, from the death of a philandering girl and its spreading results. It is wonderfully free from poetry; and this lack insures failure.

> Take any life you choose and study it:
> It gladdens, troubles, changes many lives.
> The life goes out, how many things result?
> Fate drops a stone, and to the utmost shores
> The circles spread.

Furthermore, honesty is the best policy, the early bird catches the worm, a stitch in time saves nine—it is not difficult to remember platitudes prior to the golden age of Dr. Frank Crane. But—poetry? vision?

> Concretely said, in brief,
> A man and woman have produced this child.

This much is conceivable.

> What was the child's pre-natal circumstance?
> How did her birth affect her father, mother?
> What did their friends, old women, relatives
> Take from the child in feeling, joy or pain?
> What of her childhood friends, her days at school,
> Her teachers, girlhood sweethearts, lovers later,
> When she became a woman?

From the depths of an amiable disgust we repeat: what of them?

A word now on the Domesday book of old:
Remember not a book of doom, but a book
Of houses; domus, house, so domus book.

This is hardly an improvement on the Bay Psalm book. There is little that may not be versified by such hocus-pocus; as,

A word now on this hocus-pocus; not
A poky hoax, but hoc est corpus, this
Is the body (of the host); so hocus-pocus.

Here is a typical stretch, showing the slipshod transitions:

Coroner Merival woke to scan the *Times*,
And read the story of the suicide
Of Gregory Wenner, circle big enough
From Elenor Murray's death, but unobserved
Of Merival, until he heard the hint
Of Dr. Trace, who made the autopsy,
That Gregory Wenner might have caused the death
Of Elenor Murray, or at least was near
When Elenor Murray died. Here is the story,
Worked out by Merival as he went about
Unearthing secrets, asking here and there
What Gregory Wenner was to Elenor Murray.
The coroner had a friend who was a friend
Of Mrs. Wenner. Acting on the hint
Of Dr. Trace he found this friend and learned
What follows here of Gregory Wenner, then
What Mrs. Wenner learned in coming home
To bury Gregory Wenner. What he learned
The coroner told the jury—

and, we trust, the jury tolled the bell.

The coroner had a friend who was a friend
Of Mrs. Wenner.

These lines deserve to be remembered forever, together with Adolf Wolff's

Psychology, sociology, and ethics,

William Pegram's

Isomerism and allotropy

Masters' own

Hereditary of sanguinity

and a few other of the immortals. With a passable theme, like another Traubel, Masters seems to think that all needful is to sit down by the hour, and write on and off and on again. It never came to him to seek the cave and then the crest of Horeb, and wait for the still small voice. Yet it is so that poetry comes. If the author had had an essential theme, it would have failed with treatment like this; and the disintegrated theme he chose, concerning the syncope (we leave you to follow us to the dictionary) of which Elenor Murray died, with his involved ramifications—such a theme could achieve importance only in the hands of a supreme master. Its author is not even an adept at the art; and until he learns his craft, he cannot expect to be regarded seriously as a poet. Abounding vigor he has, a vision at times of helpful clarity, and a far scattering of lines of gold; but scattering bottle corks can hardly keep afloat a load of lead.

CHAPTER XI

John Hall Wheelock: Light on a Hill

American poetry today is rich in all three of the dominant English strains. Robinson, Frost, and Masters have the gloomy Anglo-Saxon contemplation; Vachel Lindsay, Amy Lowell, and Carl Sandburg lead in the Norman gusto; and there are many tongues for the Celtic ecstasy, among whom John Hall Wheelock has a unique pre-eminence. The elfin strain is not his so much as it is Rose O'Neill's; or, with a contemplative blend, Elinor Wylie's; or, with a clever zest, Edna St. Vincent Millay's: but the climbing ecstasy that once before was encountered in Sidney Lanier is incarnate in this singer.

The Wheelock family gets its name from the town of Wheelock in England; a Cambridge classmate of John Milton's, Ralph Wheelock, was the first to leave the ancient island for the new continent. The strain has been chiefly scholars and farmers; a queer healthy blending. Eleazar Wheelock, founder and a president of Dartmouth College, was an early forebear of the poet. William Almy Wheelock, a New York business man, president of the Equitable Life Insurance Company and the First National Bank of New York, had in William Efner Wheelock a versatile son, who was successively lawyer, physician, and botanist. His mother's ancestry reached back to the early Quaker settlements. He was married to Emile Charlotte Hall, born in Dublin, and

daughter of Dr. John Hall, who was called to an important Manhattan pastorate when his daughter was only a few years old. The rest of this Irish side of the poet's ancestry remained in their homeland; the second generation of the emigrant branch of the family became teachers, divines, or men of letters. In the fall of 1886 the poet was born of this marriage at Far Rockaway, Long Island, the eldest of three children. His boyhood was divided between New York City and the rolling dunelands surrounding the family's country home at Easthampton, Long Island. He completed his elementary education at Morristown School, even at this time doing metrical translations from the Latin; and graduated from Harvard in 1908 as Class Poet. He roomed during Senior Year with Edward Sheldon, the playright, and counted among his close friends Charles L. Seeger, the composer; Van Wyck Brooks, the critic; and Alan Seeger, one of the more promising younger poets who died in the World War. Wheelock spent the next two years at the Universities of Göttingen and Berlin, and in travel through France, Italy and the Dalmatian coastland. These wander-years were years of constant verse writing.

Among literary influences, Shelley was his first passion; Goethe, a later love. Heine, too, is among his gods, and the sustained lyric flights of Swinburne moved him profoundly. For their content alone, Whitman and Henley were guides to his maturer moods. But more than all these were two other influences: the sea, with its vast desolate beachlands and vaster acres of water beyond; and the city, especially New York City, which reflects what he has described somewhere as "the grandeur and pathos of the human animal, of which it is the creation and symbol." His first volume, *The*

Human Fantasy, appeared in 1911; the next two years witnessed *The Beloved Adventure* and *Love and Liberation*. After a crystallizing silence of six years, *Dust and Light* came, and in 1922 *The Black Panther*. He is unmarried, a devotee of swimming and walking, and inclined to be solitary. He must be alone in order to climb out of himself into that gymnastic transfiguration which we call ecstasy.

The Human Fantasy reveals from the start the skilled technician that Masters has never become. This is the least of its crowns; it is an electric book, surcharged with a sparkling flood of love—of love for the vistas of sea and land, of love for the canyoned reaches of his city, of love for Love. The opening hundred pages contain an exquisite story of young love, told in shaped lyrics of ecstatic passion. It is hard to write of this poet without a constant mention of love: for poetry is his god, and to him poetry is love. The opening poem is delicate and charmingly whimsical:

I see you stand before me,—
Bizarre, absurd, enchanting,—
(The swinging, silver satchel,
The dear, ridiculous dress),

A little, dauntless figure
Half lost in the enormous
Gay picture-hat bowed forward
Across the eager face.

Its single feather trembles
Against the dusk. Beyond you
The squalid, huddled city
With one red, flaring lamp

Looms sinister and haunting,
—The wastes that bred and bore you,—
A mockery heartbreaking,
A menace and a joke.

But you stand all unknowing,—
Glad-hearted, well, and reckless,
Magnanimous and merry,
My lost one,—O my youth!

It is this first inconsummate lover who heals him of the malady of a boy's dreaming, into "the dear sensual Fact of things." If there are no skies his love does not pierce, at least it is rooted in actual earth. His gloss explains,

So it appears that he fell in love with her,—a little shop-girl, I believe she was, and a Roman Catholic, pretty, jolly, impetuous and foolish, tawdry and absurd enough. Well, it was but a boy and girl affair in the end, very youthful and unworldly, very silly as many would say. . . . Yet, even so, how it could have happened I can't imagine, (he) being the unreal and complicated sort of ghost that he is, always with his nose in a book, or imagining some fanciful thing; the last sort of person that you would picture in any real flesh and blood romance, and so commonplace a one at that.

At the end there was unsullied renunciation of the "light little bird that she was," who moves through these early poems. There is a splendid sense of the tiny poignancy of this love story lost in the breathing immensity of the city:

Yet thunders of her traffic, east and west,
Sounded like waters on a distant shore—
And in the silences forevermore
The laborings of a titanic breast.

In all of it he sees—

> The carnal buoyance and the common sense
> Of sane and sensual humanity!
>
> So broke this beauty on him for a space,
> Jostled among the shoulders of the crowd,
> When suddenly, as from a breaking cloud,
> Out of the throng rose the beloved face.

There is a danger in rhapsody, that the sheer emotional exuberance will produce an uncontrolled word-freshet. Wheelock does not always hold his flood to its narrow channel; some of his lowlands are swamped under a muddy spread of turgid words. He is constantly at work to rein in the young jubilation:

> Up through the iron gorges, like a ghost, . . .
> Sneaks the first hour of morning.

With aloof sharpness he etches the girl:

> A certain hint in her of common sense,
> A practicalness of all illusion void,
> Stripping all facts of a futile eloquence,
> These were the traits his watchfulness enjoyed.
>
> . . . As one who knows the dingy world of fact—
> Its lusts and hates and how their graves are dug,
> Still sitting apart, most delicate and intact,
> Knowing, but with raised shoulders and a shrug.

There is exquisite control of his rhythmic medium in this poem; but at its best it is second-flight singing. He can rise in his finales—

> O dear and common world, in factory and in slum
> Still nursing at the breast the wild and veering vision

Incalculably brave, cruel, divine, and dumb,
Crowning the ages' toil with sensual indecision,
Mother, murdress, tomb, and womb of Christs to come!

And again,

The face of heaven was beautiful and breathless,
Like prophets shone the first stars in the west

which just misses magnificence. His vision is wide:

World upon world, the inviolate reaches run,
Star upon star, forever strewn abroad,
With meteors whirling on the fiery road
Of their eclipse to realms beyond the sun.

"Old Women," his sharp picture of the discarded Magdalens who have become matchwomen, is one of the finest flashes in this sequence, with their sale of the little fires—

For gentlemen that happen by,
To light up with along the way,
Which, having burnt their beauty out,
Even as herself they cast away.

His repeated note, summing up the whole matter, is:

Splendid it is to live and glorious to die!

This human illogical exultation and affirmation is the note that never leaves him. He has seen life in all its cruelties at his own finger-tips; nevertheless, the age-weary pessimism stretching from Ecclesiastes to Hardy and Robinson and the modern disillusioned is not his, but instead the jubilance rising above the last searing disillusionment. This is the note throbbing always through the

greatest poetry. If Wheelock does not reach the height, the fault will not be in his mood. A twilight contemplation achieves "Sunday Evening in the Common," a magical vision:

Look—on the topmost branches of the world
The blossoms of the myriad stars are thick,
Over the huddled rows of stone and brick
A few sad wisps of empty smoke are curled
Like ghosts, languid and sick.

One breathless moment now the city's moaning
Fades, and the endless streets seem vague and dim;
There is no sound around the whole world's rim,
Save in the distance a small band is droning
Some desolate old hymn.

Van Wyck, how often have we been together
When this same moment made all mysteries clear,
—The infinite stars that brood above us here,
And the gray city in the soft June weather,
So tawdry and so dear!

He closes the book with a clue to his chief attitude:

Hail all life everywhere,
Ocean and earth, stars, clouds, and bounteous air,
Forevermore, all living things! . . .
Now lie
A million souls in the great mystery
Purged, as in death or love;
Into each room I steal and pause above
The spirit in each for a space
With a last prayer. . . .
I am lifted beyond your reach.
O the last rapture baffles the heart of speech.
I love you, and greet you here.
I rise, I whirl, I fade, I disappear.
I melt into song above you,
Showering back a last farewell, "I love you!"

His music is less here than his mood; but in it an odd great trinity is visible—the spirit of *Leaves of Grass,* the melody of "Marshes of Glynn," and as an overtone another poet who rose and melted into the air above his reverent lovers. There is nothing small in the aim.

"The Beloved Adventure," his characteristic phrase for life, opens on the same note grown stronger:

> I whirl my hair in your face for sheer defiance;
> Turning then, on the brows I kiss you.

"Along the Dunes," "Sea Memories," "Noon," "A Swim at Sunset," foretell the surging song that is to mount even higher in subsequent volumes. These choral antiphonies are enormous in their music:

> Still the hand of twilight with darkness strokes and stills
> The somber and immense breast of the swelling sea,
> And the pale hand of dawn across the darkness spills
> Her clear and crystal cup of radiant ecstasy—;
> The white, immaculate waste of morning sobs and thrills!

From this he can pass to pictures as exquisite as this etching:

> Night flutters in like a vast, ungainly moth.

Poetry is, to him, "the terrible Loveliness," "the rhythmical body Exuberant with excess." It is a fine frenzy, which does surprise often by a fine excess. There are times when the excess is not fine; and his later books indicate more of the pruning-knife than his earlier. But there are things like "To the Average Man" which satisfy wholly:

How can you rust your flesh with ulcerous ills
And wreak upon yourself a sensual wrong,
When lowing cattle on a thousand hills
Take the dumb death to make your body strong?

'Mid lurid city and in loathsome den
Eternal spirits work for you and wake,
And all the hearts of all the world of men
Are laboring on together for your sake.

The cloth and very garment that you wear
Against your heart, in distant lands afar
Was wrought by hearts more aged in despair—
How shall you answer them for what you are?

Will you return them nothing for all this!
For factories, wheels, and grim machineries whirled,
Sages that plumb for you the huge Abyss,
And the vast science of the modern world,

Heroes and warriors that for you have bled,
Farmers tilling the stubble field and stone,
The austere host of the heroic dead
Who cleared the way and wrought for you alone.

Your mother bore and bred you at her breast
With holy longing and with patient pain—
And the dawn wakes you, and the stars give rest;
Shall all these influences be in vain!

The prophets and the poets and the sages
For *you* have triumphed over hate and lust,
And groaned for *you* the irrevocable ages—
How dare you turn and grovel in the dust!

Anteus found the groveling wholesome; but at times it takes a score of generations of groveling to produce an independent, sun-confronting man. If verse like this could pierce the pachyderm hide, it might stir and lift. It will stir some, and lift them.

There is light loveliness too in this book—

Sweet she is and full of fleetness,
Like a flash of summer lightning,
Beautiful and swift and blinding—
In the tragic night,

That reveals the shy recesses
Of some undiscovered forest,—
The dim coverts of her being,
Odorous with dusk.

Like a little mournful wild-rose,
Full of lovely, luring petals,
Bitter thorns and wounding beauty,
Piercing-sharp, but sweet.

There are two hundred and sixty-two love poems in a part of the third volume. Housman has given us altogether a hundred and four songs. A hundred and four of Housman's are worth preserving; some score of this two hundred and sixty-two seem, to the type-wearied, to possess permanence. Even that is an admirable accomplishment; but how these pages call for compression, and selection of such beauty as:

Lift your arms to the stars
And give an immortal shout,
Not all the veils of darkness
Can put your beauty out!

You are armed with love, with love
Nor all the powers of Fate
Can touch you with a spear,
Nor all the hands of Hate.

What of good and evil,
Hell and Heaven above—
Trample them with love!
Ride over them with love!

Many of the songs are saturated with felicities:

All your little beauties
  Are spears to hunt me down.

I stab my heart
  With the thought of you;
To kiss the blade
  The song pours through.

When you spread your arms to take me,
  When your breath comes thick and fast,
Song and love of Song forsake me,
  At the source of Song at last.

From the opiate arms of darkness,
  From the beautiful embrace,
Lovely, faint, and satiated,
  Morning lifts a dreamless face.

Scattered quotations indicate his remembrance of the sesame to beauty; it is the songs in their entirety that increase the conviction of his sincerity, the certainty that here is no forced passion, but a heart speaking:

Tell me why I love you,
  Name yourself, my Heart,
Every inward bounty,
  Every outward art:

The hands, the lips, the eyes,
  The beauty in your breast,
Your very inmost spirit
  Separate from the rest.

When your lips have ceased,
  When your words have done,
I will answer you,
  "Not for these alone."

It is a meteor drop from this to soggy platitudes like:

Why do I lift my voice
  Drunken as though with wine?
Because I have discovered
  That everything is divine.

Identification with ecstasy will grant that this is so; but with neither the Merrythought wine nor the elixir of the spirit, it is impossible to concede, for example, that much of Masters is divine, without an immediate redefinition of the high cloudy adjective. Yet again and again the chaotic exuberance of love is this poet's:

O would in the moment of love
  I might bid the stars stand still,
And the wheel of the world repose,
  Fixed and immovable!

On the starry summits of beauty
  Locked in a long embrace,
With hair blown backward, together,
  Breathless, and face to face!

Ere the vision be shattered, and headlong
  From our dream in the heights we be hurled,
From the cry of our spirits in choir,
  Back into the pit of the world.

The magnificent picture in the mid stanza droops in the conclusion; and so strongly did the critical reception of this book emphasize the droop over the magnificence, that six years elapsed before the fourth volume appeared. *Dust and Light*, when it did appear, shone as so far the chief fruition of his genius.

The stuff of poetic ecstasy appears in all the earlier volumes; but it remained for the silence to nurture and

shape a singing as rhapsodic and contained as the best of Sidney Lanier. We had not been prepared for the restrained wonder of "Earth":

> Grasshopper, your fairy song
> And my poem alike belong
> To the dark and silent earth
> From which all poetry has birth. . . .
>
> Deftly does the dust express
> In mind her hidden loveliness,
> And from her cool silence stream
> The cricket's cry and Dante's dream;
> For the earth that breeds the trees
> Breeds cities, too, and symphonies.
> Equally her beauty flows
> Into a savior, or a rose—
> Looks down in dream, and from above
> Smiles at herself in Jesus' love. . . .
>
> Even as the growing grass
> Up from the soil religions pass,
> And the field that bears the rye
> Bears parables and prophecy. . . .
> Yea, the quiet and cool sod
> Bears in her breast the dream of God.

"September by the Sea," "Storm and Sun," "Golden Noon," are the great rhapsodies in the book, with one to be named later. Only an echo of this can be given here:

> O Love, now the herded billows over the holy plain
> Of the trampled sea move thunderously, and cast
> Their wrath on the dark shore—let us set out again,
> Let us make seaward, and be gone at last
>
> Into the choiring, clashing, wild waste of waters strown
> Around us,—forward—forward—, and leave behind
> The little frets and the fevers, just we two alone,
> Heart-free, as once in days long out of mind! . . .

Lone to the last marge—lone—lone—lone—
And void to where the huddled waters crowd
The brim—along the floor of heaven's darkened throne
Moves, like a ghost, the shadow of a cloud.

Shadow and light pass over shifting, shine and shade
Vanish and veer, upon the chilly rim
Kindle like crowns the cloud-crests along the east arrayed
And swords of flame, like swords of the seraphim.

The floors of the sea catch fire, the eye of the world's light
Dilates, and into a glory of glittering gold
Break the pale greens and purples; the sun in heaven's height
Unveils himself for all men to behold

And all the world is a-riot, behind us and before,
With fire and color—the heavens roll back their gloom,
From zone to zone, from the zenith to the everlasting floor
Reaches one resonant and radiant room.

All of the volume does not succeed; there is a thin layer of war verses which is regrettable. He is most at home in closer beauty:

Here is the low table where we laughed together,
Chairs, where we have sat, huddle side by side:
In the quiet night-time the old house is musing
Deep in vanished days, and old dreams that died.

Where my youth has sorrowed now lies only moonlight,
Moonlight on the bed—moonlight on the floor—
And across the pillow where your head lay dreaming,
O my lost beloved—moonlight evermore.

or in such a supreme symphony as "The Moonlight Sonata." Here is the crest of his merging of himself with the moonlit earth:

Rapturous bridal! O wild heart!
To be part of thee, a part
Of this holy beauty here—
Sacred sorrow drawing near!

Sweet surrender—O my sweet,
Longingly my pulses beat—
Dazzling thought and fearful of
The dear fury of thy love—
Even now that draws me down,
My faint body to thine own,
Near and nearer yet, till I
Tangled in thy being lie,
Close and close, for sheer excess
Wearied out with loveliness:
All this little self, this me,
Soothed into the self of thee,
Rendered up in ecstasy!

Almost now thou seem'st to steal
From my breast the self. I feel
How my being everywhere,
As in dream, upon the air
Widens 'round me, till I grow
All I look on, overflow—;
And into the life adored
All the life of me is poured,
Through warm portals of thy heart
Drifting gently where thou art,
Who art all things, in the breeze
Stirring all the tangled trees
To low whispers, how I pass
Through each tiny blade of grass,
Tremble in moonlight, and rise
Looking out of other eyes—
Mystery of mysteries!
Pang of self, and tragical
Birth into the enlightened All—
O dark rapture—to flow, press,
Cease into thy loveliness,
With exalted weariness
Render up myself, and be,
Selfless, the dear self of thee,
In divine oblivion
One with the beloved one!

This is the summation of ecstasy; this is the summation of love; and this may well be the summation of life, which we hail by "the word of the sweetest song and all song, That strong and delicious word" death.

The Black Panther, the volume succeeding, has a more sustained height in one poem, "The Divine Fantasy," than he has elsewhere reached. The opening invocation is to some kindred dweller on a far star, who may be gazing up at the poet, even as the latter gazes up at him. The poet seeks from him the reassuring word:

> Eternity—and all is well.
> Brother, be of good cheer; we, too, have known!
> Not lonely moves, nor utterly alone,
> Your sad fraternity through the dark of God:
> But the confederate legions are abroad,
> Life's flag advances on the starry way!
> And Consciousness, still battling, still at bay,
> Holds the bright forts against Oblivion.

Poetry is no more than bright forts against oblivion. From this exalted mood the climb is to the humbler wonder of the night-noises of earth. Some one has defined genius as the power to make analogies; the poem is starred with such startling images as "Hunger, the shadow cast by death."

> The mind of Man
> Rebels against the miserable plan—
> Flings its frail web of thought across the path
> Of suns in heaven, and in holy wrath
> On blood of murdered brothers nourished, still
> Thunders to all the world, *Thou shalt not kill!*
> And the worm's death is in the sparrow's song.

With deft elaboration, compound of infinite memorable pictures, the case is built up toward the conclusion:

The still
Ecstasy of the firefly that trails
Among the shadows where the starlight fails
His body's burning love. Forever flows
The dreadful drama to its stately close
And endless ending—the fierce carnival
Of death and passion, wherein each and all
Mix, and are mingled, slaughter, blend, and pass
Each into other—the high poem that has
No end and no beginning. . . .

Dread Loveliness! Be strong in me, be strong,
To utter forth your meaning in my song!

There are other magnificent poems in the book—the swinging beauty of "Sea Horizons," the high vision of "Night Hath Its Fear," the profound spaces of "The Sea Hawk," and many shorter pieces. American poetry has climbed high, when it can picture the human spirit—

Her being is
Throned on so frail a pulse; such fleeting breath
Bears up her dream across the gulf of death
And the obscure abyss.

Always she hears
The hurtling chariots of the hurrying blood,
Her shuttling breath that in the solitude
Weaves the one self she wears.

He has given speech to the dumb, a voice to the inarticulate. In "Renascence" Edna St. Vincent Millay sang a rapture as authentic, although not as mature, as the best of Wheelock; scattered singers have touched it in a stanza, at times a short poem. But no singer living has so often found the hilltop, the "abundance and overflowing delight in thinking and feeling that come . . . only in solitude."

This poetry lacks the element that gives it direct appeal to popular favor—the element of actual speech rediscovered in the poet's words. Before an average audience, it is not nearly so effective as Sandburg, Frost, the best of Lindsay and Masters, the more human songs of Rose O'Neill and Edna Millay. It is that rarer thing, the speech of the spirit: and the spirit uses slang and the colloquial, if at all, only as a disguise. With many men, the spirit never speaks, except in an incoherent stutter—the faint broken unintelligibility of a tossing ship far at sea heard over a weak radio. There are those to whom it speaks its high unbroken music: to these Wheelock comes with overpowering force. There is a chamber poetry, or, better, a poetry for the solitude of the midnight crest unabashed beneath the intangible stars —a poetry for poets; this is of it. Even Paul stayed but a little while within the blinding light on the road to Damascus. Here is one who has more than once stood unblinded in its continuing splendor.

CHAPTER XII

Edna St. Vincent Millay: a Clever Sappho

Contemporary poetic rankings are unsure things. Up to a few years ago, any general census of American critical opinion as to the six leading poets would in all probability have named Robinson, Frost, Masters, Sandburg, Lindsay, and Amy Lowell. Even then there were deciduous clacques megaphoning other names, Oppenheim, Aiken, Neihardt, Fletcher and H. D., Kreymborg and Bodenheim: a solitary counter-tenor from London shrilled "Pound!" a feebler salutation insisted "Cale Young Rice!" But in general the six first listed held the platform. Two or three of these, the conviction grows, are not entitled to even such split laureateship. The critics have cracked apart recently like Texas mud in June. There are those who cling to the grouping above; there are centrists who would substitute, for Masters and Miss Lowell, Elinor Wylie and some additional one; there are out-and-out lefters who name the six as T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, Maxwell Bodenheim, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Alfred Kreymborg. At this moment the present writer would be disposed to list, after several erasures and substitutions, the six in this wise: Robinson, Frost, Wheelock, Rose O'Neill, Carl Sandburg, and the vanished Vachel Lindsay who once wrote "The Congo."

Ask any of these statisticians of bardic frenzy, "But what about Edna St. Vincent Millay?"

"Oh—that's right . . . She'll have to go in somewhere . . ."

She has a secure reputation; her slim offering entitles her to high ranking, even though it be just below the leaders.

There is little to chronicle about her life. She was born on February 22, 1892, in Camden, Maine. In 1911, while still an undergraduate at Vassar, she wrote "Renascence," which was included in that year's anthology, *The Lyric Year*. She was married in 1923 to Eugen Boissevain, of Holland, and spends her time between New York City and Italy. She is an admirable reader of her own poems. Three small books, *Renascence* (1917), *Second April* (1921), *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1922), and a few broadsides, and the tale so far is done.

"Renascence" still remains her most astonishing product, especially when its date of composition is remembered.

> All I could see from where I stood
> Was three long mountains and a wood;
> I turned and looked the other way,
> And saw three islands in a bay.
> So with my eyes I traced the line
> Of the horizon, thin and fine,
> Straight around till I was come
> Back to where I'd started from.

From this simple beginning the mood of mystical exultation commences:

> And reaching up my hand to try,
> I screamed to feel it touch the sky.
> I screamed, and—lo!—Infinity
> Came down and settled over me.

She passes into a Whitman mood of universal self-identification, which is so overpowering that she seeks death. Death comes, and she finds it sweet to lie six feet under ground; but the remembered beauty of earth conquers her—

> And all at once the heavy night
> Fell from my eyes, and I could see,—
> A drenched and dripping apple-tree,
> A last long line of silver rain,
> A sky grown clear and blue again.
> And as I looked a quickening gust
> Of wind blew up to me and thrust
> Into my face a miracle
> Of orchard-breath, and with the smell,—
> I know not how such things can be!—
> I breathed my soul back into me.
> Ah! Up then from the ground sprang I
> And hailed the earth with such a cry
> As is not heard save from a man
> Who has been dead, and lives again.
> About the trees my arms I wound;
> Like one gone mad I hugged the ground;
> I raised my quivering eyes on high;
> I laughed and laughed into the sky,
> Till at my throat a strangling sob
> Caught fiercely, and a great heart-throb
> Sent instant tears into my eyes:
> O God, I cried, no dark disguise
> Can e'er hereafter hide from me
> Thy radiant identity!
> Thou canst not move across the grass
> But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,
> Nor speak, however silently,
> But my hushed voice will answer Thee.
> I know the path that tells Thy way
> Through the cool eve of every day;
> God, I can push the grass apart
> And lay my finger on Thy heart!

This is a more piercing, flame-like, youthful ecstasy than the slower, vaster magnificence of Lanier and the more sonorous symphonies of Wheelock; it has more sharpness than the latter's "Earth," and is to be compared in breathless rhapsodic quality only with his "Moonlight Sonata." It is the authentic mysticism of a girl of nineteen, in this case; and there are mystics of three score and ten years who have no different vision. A greater mystic was as specific:

> But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
> Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
> Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
> Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.

Miss Millay builds on:

> The world stands out on either side
> No wider than the heart is wide;
> Above the world is stretched the sky,—
> No higher than the soul is high. . . .
>
> The soul can split the sky in two,
> And let the face of God shine through.

This is an ecstatic modern relocation of God, whose heart here is placed as dead, unthinking, travailing brown earth; it is a dilation of the deity who walked the night guard for the tented Israelites, who wrestled Jacob, and had his foot on the mulberry trees. The diagram of the world and sky given is subjectively true; but it is a thin egocentric truth. There are souls that see God in the cloven sky: but enlarging telescopes have not such souls. Gods appear as spring flowers of the human race; a wide maturity like Lester Ward's reports no trace of them from Arcturus to Canopus, and far beyond both. The

spirit of ecstasy comes, and the poet names it God; a genuine sense of glittering universality has come, no matter its right name. Miss Millay has made her choice, and given her verdict:

> Not Truth, but Faith, it is
> That keeps the world alive. If all at once
> Faith were to slacken . . . birds now flying fearless
> Across would drop in terror to the earth;
> Fishes would drown; and the all-governing reins
> Would tangle in the frantic hands of God
> And the worlds gallop headlong to destruction.

She is a magnificent singer of this, in "Interim," a poem considering death in lines starred with beauty:

> When I can make
> Of ten small words a rope to hang the world!
> "I had you and I have you now no more."

If it is a young verdict, reared on beach sand, it is still shaped with a consummate skill whose chief flaw, in spirit and handling, is a pervading cleverness. She is always aware of her masterly art: she has counted the ten small words; they are never nine nor eleven. This mathematical accuracy persists in her finest frenzy; the possession is not quite blind enough to have full mystic veritability.

"God's World," in the same volume, is often quoted as her best poem in short:

> O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
> Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
> Thy mists, that roll and rise!
> Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
> And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag

To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!
World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

Long have I known a glory in it all,
But never knew I this;
Here such a passion is
As stretcheth me apart,—Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year;
My soul is all but out of me,—let fall
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

This is a lovely music, whose ecstasy could not have been bettered, and whose technique only slightly, by one of Campion's peers. But this was written only yesterday: and such outworn solemnicisms as *thy, thee, stretcheth, prithee,* and the awkward *thou'st* are tinsel rather than gold. The spirit is too quivery to be quite believable; it is a hysteric Sensitive that cannot bear one burning leaf or one bird note. The mood is authentic, but the phrasing is overdone. Even with the forced fraying of the passion, however, the poem is exquisite.

There are many lovely things in the book—and often the sense of strain is wanting in slight things, as in "Tavern," "Afternoon on a Hill," "When the Year Grows Old," with its magical—

Oh, beautiful at nightfall
The soft spitting snow!
And beautiful the bare boughs
Rubbing to and fro!

or the fine fall of "Ashes of Life":

Love has gone and left me,—and the neighbors knock and borrow,
And life goes on forever like the gnawing of a mouse,—
And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
There's this little street and this little house.

It is a pity that even in a piece like this we feel the artist's aloof cleverness sharpening the genuine emotion far beyond its need. A greater artist wrote—

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more; it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

In both cases the mood following the similar line is "Hollow, hollow, hollow all delight." But the English poet looks on the tragic enormity of all life: fools have died yesterday; the brief candle dies; the walking shadow merges into a greater shadow; the poor player swaggers and fumes into silence; the whole is an idiot's fustian chatter, signifying nothing . . . While the American poet stares with blank eyes at her life only: at this little street and this little house. Her vision is authentic as the other, as the word of an unvisioned woman, who is hardly this poet: it is the dramatic speech of a despair infinitely little. It is so well done (as in the gnawing of the mouse simile) that it shouts aloud its cleverness: and the finished product is the word of a petty sorrow. This overtone of pettiness is frequent in her singing: she speaks as if through a Sappho's mouth pinched tight by unripe persimmons. It is a miserly magic.

The sonnets at the end are exquisitely wrought, perhaps at their height in the sestet of the second:

> There are a hundred places where I fear
> To go—so with his memory they brim!

And entering with relief some quiet place
Where never fell his foot or shone his face
I say, "There is no memory of him here!"
And so stand stricken, so remembering him!

and the totality of the fifth:

If I should learn, in some quite casual way,
That you were gone, not to return again—
Read from the back-page of a paper, say,
Held by a neighbor in a subway train,
How at the corner of this avenue
And such a street (so are the papers filled)
A hurrying man—who happened to be you—
At noon today had happened to be killed,
I should not cry aloud—I could not cry
Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place—
I should but watch the station lights rush by
With a more careful interest on my face,
Or raise my eyes and read with greater care
Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

Magnificent—and almost diabolically clever. One whose emotion is forever reined could not cry aloud in the formal publicity of the scene sketched; and perhaps the human breed has hidden itself in such a thick veneer, since Othello mourned aloud in the garden of the castle on Cyprus. This would be a general pity; and there are those alive whose honest emotions would cry at the top step of Heaven or the window table at Childs's.

"Second April" starts well with the well-wrought "The Blue-flag in the Bog," the bright "The Bean-stalk," and this clever piece:

Death devours all lovely things;
Lesbia with her sparrow
Shares the darkness—presently
Every bed is narrow.

Unremembered as old rain
Dries the sheer libation,
And the little petulant hand
Is an annotation.

After all, my erstwhile dear,
My no longer cherished,
Need we say it was not love,
Now that love is perished?

Her singing reflects much witty comment on the impermanent amour. "The Poet and His Book" is a brilliant bit of studied naïveté, with exquisite splashes of beauty:

Boys and girls that steal
From the shocking laughter
Of the old, to kneel
By a dripping rafter
Under the discolored eaves,
Out of trunks with hingeless covers
Lifting tales of saints and lovers,
Travelers, goblins, thieves,

Suns that shine by night,
Mountains made from valleys,—
Bear me to the light,
Flat upon your bellies
By the webby window lie,
Where the little flies are crawling,—
Read me, margin me with scrawling,
Do not let me die!

There are lovely elegies and shapely sonnets; but two little lyrics excel them for sheer song. There is—

Doubt no more that Oberon—
Never doubt that Pan
Lived, and played a reed, and ran
After nymphs in a dark forest,

In the merry, credulous days,—
Lived, and led a fairy band
Over the indulgent land
Ah, for in this dourest, sorest
Age man's eye has looked upon,
Death to fauns and death to fays,
Still the dogwood dares to raise—
Healthy tree, with trunk and root—
Ivory bowls that bear no fruit,
And the starlings and the jays—
Birds that cannot even sing—
Dare to come again in spring!

It is a juvenile wisdom that yields to the illusion of the golden past, to use again Lester Ward's phrase; that sees its own age, the only age it tastes in substance, as the "dourest, sorest age man's eye has looked upon." The poet establishes here that she does not believe the pretty tales she attests by irrelevant realities. More gifted with unfailing song than any singer writing, she allows this to come forth muddied with insincerity. The beauty to the ear is ever-present; but the singer who is estranged from truth gives at best the exquisite jewel-box with the jewel gone.

The other tune, "Travel," is a memorable word of the vagabond spirit:

The railroad track is miles away,
  And the day is loud with voices speaking,
Yet there isn't a train goes by all day
  But I hear its whistle shrieking.

All night there isn't a train goes by,
  Though the night is still for sleep and dreaming,
But I see its cinders red on the sky,
  And hear its engine steaming.

My heart is warm with the friends I make,
And better friends I'll not be knowing,
Yet there isn't a train I wouldn't take
No matter where it's going.

This is faithful to one mood, by no means an infrequent one with men. It is lovely throughout.

"A Few Figs from Thistles" continues the fault, and accentuates the virtues. "Recuerdo" is a singing thing, even if the fifth line seems out of the picture, and despite the fact that such wanderers would hardly have purchased a dozen apples and a dozen pears, at modern fruit-stand rates. "Good morning, mother," has to be translated to the archaic "Good morrow, mother," to suit the intended veil of quaintness; but the beauty of the last line wipes out some of the blame. "She is Overheard Singing" is dark whistling, the brave declamation of the fox with its tail trapped off; and its ending is too clever to convince. "Portrait by a Neighbor" is more sustained truthfulness; but the cleverness will not down, as in this charming whimsey:

I am not willing you should go
Into the earth, where Helen went;
She is awake by now, I know.
Where Cleopatra's anklets rust
You will not lie with my consent;
And Sappho is a roving dust;
Cressid could love again; Dido,
Rotted in state, is restless still;
You leave me much against my will.

The third of the "Four Sonnets" combines her exquisite cleverness with more sincerity than is her wont; and most sustained of all her poems is "The Singing-Woman from the Wood's Edge." Here she has chosen a theme

drafting cleverness to bring out its fantastic truth, and the blend is magnificent:

What should I be but a prophet and a liar,
Whose mother was a leprechaun, whose father was a friar?
Teethed on a crucifix and cradled under water,
What should I be but the fiend's god-daughter?

And who should be my playmates but the adder and the frog,
That was got beneath a furze-bush and born in a bog?
And what should be my singing, that was christened at an altar,
But Aves and Credos and Psalms out of the Psalter?

You will see such webs on the wet grass, maybe,
As a pixie-mother weaves for her baby,
You will find such flame at the wave's reedy ebb
As flashes in the meshes of a mer-mother's web,

But there comes to birth no common spawn
From the love of a priest for a leprechaun,
And you never have seen and you never will see
Such things as the things that swaddled me!

After all's said and after all's done,
What should I be but a harlot and a nun?

In through the bushes, on any foggy day,
My Da would come a-swishing of the drops away,
With a prayer for my death and a groan for my birth,
A-mumbling of his beads for all that he was worth.

And there sit my Ma, her knees beneath her chin,
A-looking in his face and a-drinking of it in,
And a-marking in the moss some funny little saying
That would mean just the opposite of all that he was praying!

He taught me the holy-talk of Vesper and of Matin,
He heard me my Greek and he heard me my Latin,
He blessed me and crossed me to keep my soul from evil,
And we watched him out of sight, and we conjured up the devil!

Oh, the things I haven't seen and the things I haven't known,
What with hedges and ditches till after I was grown,
And yanked both ways by my mother and my father,
With a "Which would you better?" and a "Which would you rather?"

With him for a sire and her for a dam,
What should I be but just what I am?

Gorgeous fooling . . . and underneath it, a whole world that isn't. Her first line defines her failing with singing clarity; she is a prophet *and* a liar; it is not for us to demand that she be other, although it is for us to point out the Janus faces. Always in her poetry the two keep yanking her. Poetry is somewhat the spawn of a hypocritical world-daddy and Beauty-in-the-bog, who is as amiable as Beauty-on-the street; lucky for her if she shuts her ears to her father's talk. These two Beauties, of course, are gross incarnations of another Beauty: and Poetry which retains the title must not love father or mother more than her, but must take up its task and follow her.

To return to the singing woman, "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" is not so great in itself as others of her poems, although much beauty is here. A recent poem shows her at almost her best:

Year be springing or year be falling,
The bark will drip and the birds be calling.
There's much that's fine to see and hear
In the spring of a year, in the fall of a year.
'Tis not love's going hurts my days,
But that it went in little ways.

The rhyme pattern is tuneful and fresh; there is much to commend in the song as a whole. But the veil of quaintness mars all.

There are today many in the writing game who have tempered their wind to the shearing publisher: elected hacks, whose critical "features" earn wide popularity by a cautious rope-walking above the chasms of truth and beauty. A smug cheerio hypocrisy is their battle-cry; they lead resounding crusades against the heathen use of "whom" for "who," and the dastardly iniquity of "it is me." They cannot keep their elevation, such as it is, if they rise to plainer talk; insincerity has become perforce their be-all and their end-all. Sappho was celebrated for her constant shapeliness of singing lines; and this quality Miss Millay almost invariably shares in a slighter way. It is not surprising that these lauded critics overlook in her this vice which is their essence: a cleverness substituting for sincerity. They have hailed her as the chief woman poet: and she is one of the two most tuneful poets singing among us. But a true view of her gives her this rank, without forgetting that she has her golden tongue always in her cheek.

Her theme is herself. There is not a poem in *Renascence* upon any other theme; there are a few in the next book, and perhaps one in the third, in which the poet is not the subject. *Leaves of Grass* was mainly about the poet; "whoever touches this book, touches a man." But that man strained out to include a continent and a universe; and Miss Millay stays closer home. What do we learn about her? That at nineteen she sees the face of God through the sky; that she weeps for her dead friends; that she fled her task on earth; that the earth suffused her with its beauty; that she loves her home, but a departing train more; that she is a singing woman by the

wood's edge; that she desires to hold a part of earth in heaven, and the surer immortality of remembrance on earth; that she has loved, in divers degrees, and lost or left love, in sundry seasons. This is the sum. It is much: if she could learn to cease caricaturing her emotions by overuse of the quaint pedal and the clever one, and could outgrow her preoccupation with herself, she might easily be the most important poet writing. She is not a Housman; he wrote with a terrible sincerity. Poetry demands a terrible sincerity. What should she be but just what she is?—almost our sweetest voice singing, but one who decks her one theme, herself, with studiedly quaint gauds from a dried elfin tree.

CHAPTER XIII

Amy Lowell: a Parnassian July Fourth

"Artistic reactions," says John Livingston Lowes in his penetrating "Conventional and Revolt in Poetry," "move in cycles. In perpetual alternation the same tendencies emerge, give rise to their opposites, are supplanted by these opposites, and out of that very eclipse emerge again, to undergo like metamorphosis. And there is a certain cosmic humor in the recurrent shift by virtue of which the rebel, in due course, becomes the conservative, the older freedom a new tyranny—when the cycle automatically starts again." The history of art is the record of artistic innovations, elevated into sacrosanct patterns by sheep-like followers, and supplanted by some rebel innovation, which in turn becomes the pattern until the new revolt occurs. The present age has witnessed a remarkable and cumulative attack upon the incrustations of yesterday's art. Dancing has expanded from the precise and the formal to the fluidic, the free; music has passed from Wagner to Strauss, from Strauss to Stravinsky, Scriabine, and wilder cacophonists; sculpture found new life in Rodin and Meunier, and something apparently new under the sun in Marinetti and others; pictorial art has moved from Manet, Monet, Picasso, clear to the Cubist and Dadaist extremists; prose fiction has wandered from Dorothy Richardson through James

Joyce to more hectic American over-realists. Poetry could not lag behind: it broke out in a rash of originals, from the restrained clarity of Robinson to the phantasmagoric bedlam of Mina Loy and Marianne Moore. The rumble of the coming storm was Whitman; but he had to be acclimated in France, before he could be neatly potted and displayed to decorate the Imagist porticos. Right in the forefront of the movement, now here and now there, the banner of Amy Lowell has been planted. In the midst of the outraged conservatives and the most outrageous modernists, she has preserved in the main her artistic sanity: and this is much. One lack prevents her inclusion among the prominent poets of today: a lack of something to say. In the eyes of a large portion of the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie and Zenith City alike, Miss Lowell is modern American poetry. She is a person of aggressive magnetism; this has made her a resounding publicity agent for this poetry—or, to be more accurate, for her preferences in it. But all this, admirable though it may be, must be laid aside in examining her poetry.

The Lowells trace back to Perceval Lowle or Lowell (1571–1665) who emigrated from Somersetshire to Massachusetts, and founded the branch of the family there. One of his descendants, John Lowell, was a member of the Continental Congress. Charles Lowell, son of the last named, was father of James Russell Lowell; another son, John, was the ancestor of three generations who were successively heads of the Lowell Institute of Boston, which furnishes free public lectures. The last of these, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, is now president of Harvard University; a brother, Percival Lowell, is a well-known astronomer; and Amy Lowell is his sister. Born in Brookline, Massachusetts, on February 9,

1874, Miss Lowell received her education in private schools. She has never married, and lives in her home of "Sevenels" in the exclusive suburb of her birth. She has published five or more volumes of verse, and two of criticism. One of these, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry,* was interesting as the first serious attempt to interpret the living poets to their land. In this she pictured Robinson and Frost as poets still under the spell of the past; Masters and Sandburg as poets in the thick of the conflict against the past; and John Gould Fletcher and H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, now wife of Richard Aldington, the English poet) as those who have come out of the fight victorious, have forgotten it in their art, and sing the great poetry of today and tomorrow. "Men have reared new beliefs, are living upon other planes of thought . . . Beauty is rediscovered and intoxicating," she says of these poets. Miss Doolittle's work has a fragile, anemic loveliness, seasoned with invocations to the lesser Hellenic deities: it is about as American as the ruins of Cnossos. Fletcher has not forgotten the old poetic diction entirely, and is generally wordy and uninteresting. What queer quirk dictated her choice of these as the singers of America's great poetry of today and tomorrow? They are Imagists, or were of this little group: Miss Lowell was an Imagist, most of the time. Despite its occasional excellencies, the volume was merely an elaborate bit of log-rolling in favor of her own school of versifiers, who are hardly big fish outside of Brookline. Genuine criticism is a wider thing than this.

A Dome of Many-coloured Glass, her first volume, appeared in 1912. It was not a juvenile production; but it included matter which sounds strange to those who know only the later work of the author, chiefly in the tinkling mood of:

Oh! To be a flower
  Nodding in the sun,
Bending, then upspringing,
  As the breezes run;
Holding up
A scent-brimmed cup
  Full of summer's fragrance to the summer sun.

This is the authentic vintage of 1870; here it alternated with:

You came to me bearing bright roses,
  Red like the wine of your heart;
You twisted them into a garland
  To set me aside from the mart.
Red roses to crown me your lover,
  And I walked aureoled and apart.

There was no promise here; and her next volume, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed,* two years later, showed an astonishing transition from the unimportant formalist to the vociferous experimentalist. Even the preface is bellicose: "The poet must learn his trade in the same manner, and with the same painstaking care, as the cabinet-maker." Miss Lowell ultimately learned her trade: but she had omitted from her directions to the aspiring poet one little thing, an omission that marred everything. Poets must be born poets first, with an unresting itch in their heart to sing, and with something to say: without this, all the craft in the world can not turn out a poet. Her work indicates that this is a discovery she has never made. The book opens with sustained skill, though little charm:

A drifting, April, twilight sky,
A wind which blew the puddles dry,

And slapped the river into waves
That ran and hid among the staves
Of an old wharf. A watery light
Touched bleak the granite bridge, and white
Without the slightest tinge of gold,
The city shivered in the cold.
All day my thoughts had lain as dead,
Unborn and bursting in my head.
From time to time I wrote a word
Which lines and circles overscored.
My table seemed a graveyard, full
Of coffins waiting burial.
I seized these vile abortions, tore
Them into jagged bits, and swore
To be the dupe of hope no more.

The poet walked the streets, and encountered an old man who gave her two gifts: sword blades and poppy seed. Among the sword blades of the volume is "The Cyclists," commencing:

Spread on the roadway,
With open-blown jackets,
Like black, soaring pinions
They swoop down the hillside,
  The Cyclists.

Seeming dark-plumaged
Birds, after carrion,
Careering and circling,
Over the dying
  Of England.

The technique is not offensive; but why should cyclists be regarded as carrion birds over dying England? The poet does not elucidate. There is a fanciful resemblance, of course: it is at best a superficial image, unworthy of literary perpetuity, much less extended treatment. The

imperative seems to have been to write a poem, rather than to catch some gleam of truth or beauty: or truth, which is beauty. She ventures an alien theme in "The Coal Picker," and after an embellished opening has the man see—

> A Spanish castle old,
> With silver steps and paths of gold.
> From myrtle bowers comes the plash
> Of fountains, and the emerald flash
> Of parrots in the orange trees,
> Whose blossoms pasture humming bees.

An inversion in the first line quoted, followed by much of the ancient ornate paraphernalia of verse; only the slight freshening at the end relieves it from level banality. There are slighter things, and much heavier things, like the melodramatic "The Great Adventure of Max Breuck," which starts and ends:

> But why did I kill him? Why? Why?
> In the small, gilded room, near the stair?
> My ears rack and throb with his cry,
> And his eyes goggle under his hair,
> As my fingers sink into the fair
> White skin of his throat. It was I! . . .
>
> One! Two! Three! Give me air! Oh! My God!
> One! Two! Three! I am drowning in slime!
> One! Two! Three! And his corpse, like a clod,
> Beats me into a jelly! The chime,
> One! Two! Three! and his dead legs keep time.
> Air! Give me air! Air! My God!

There is not a Sweet Singer of Lake Passamaquoddy who would not be laughed out of court for such shoddy, shoddy work. No one can refuse an enthusiastic com-

pliance with the final exhortation. We wonder if those who heap such general praise upon Miss Lowell's work can have read much of it.

If the second volume contained little of worth, at least there was an improvement in the third. "Men, Women and Ghosts" showed first of all great versatility, in the use of rhythms ranging from taut sustained rhymed stanzas to the queer hodgepodge she calls polyphonic prose. The opening "Patterns" is an affected and yet appealing poem:

> I walk down the garden paths,
> And all the daffodils
> Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.
> I walk down the patterned garden-paths
> In my stiff, brocaded gown.
> With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,
> I too am a rare
> Pattern. As I wander down
> The garden paths.

Much of this technique argues an unfamiliarity with elementary rules of sentence construction. She strays into lovely rhythms in brief passages:

> I would be the pink and silver as I ran along the paths,
> And he would stumble after,
> Bewildered by my laughter.

The next line indicates how she can lose a thread of effective rhythm for a bungling interruption:

> I should see the sun flashing from his sword-hilt and the buckles on his shoes.

The ending is effective:

In Summer and in Winter I shall walk
Up and down
The patterned garden-paths
In my stiff brocaded gown.
The squills and daffodils
Will give place to pillared roses, and to asters, and to snow.
I shall go
Up and down
In my gown.
Gorgeously arrayed,
Boned and stayed.
And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace
By each button, hook, and lace.
For the man who should loose me is dead,
Fighting with the Duke in Flanders,
In a pattern called a war.
Christ! What are patterns for?

This is, in the eyes of many, Miss Lowell's most effective poem. It is essentially sentimental, in a mood presumably appropriate to a former age and a foreign setting. If the last line is profanity, it is weak; if it is an appeal, it is more in the picture; but, taken with the line before, is decidedly artificial—an engineered climax. War is as much a pattern, and no more, than anything else. The woman's wooing and intended marriage is a pattern, more of the garden variety, and by the ribald likened to war at times. It is theatrically effective: and it is called her best poem.

"Pickthorn Manor" is a long poem in an elaborate eleven-line stanza, with a melodramatic finale, in which husband and wife drown together below a boat containing the wife's lover:

> They lie entangled in the twisting roots,
> Embraced forever. Their cold marriage bed
> Close-canopied and curtained by the shoots
> Of willows and pale birches. At the head,

White lilies, like still swans, placidly float
And sway above the pebbles. Here are waves
Sun-smitten for a threaded counterpane
Gold-woven on their graves.
In perfect quietness they sleep, remote
In the green, rippled twilight. Death has smote
Them to perpetual oneness who were twain.

"Has smote" is a solecism which some may excuse on the outworn plea of poetic license. The weakness of her narratives is seen at a glance comparing them with current work of Masefield, Robinson, Frost, Chesterton, and several others. She is as inconsequential in her long-winded games poems proceeding:

Turn, hoop,
Burn, hoop,
Twist and twine
Hoop of mine.
Flash along,
Leap along,
Right at the sun,
Run, hoop, run.
Faster and faster,
Whirl, twirl. . . .

A different method is evidenced in "The Grocery":

"Hullo, Alice!"
"Hullo, Leon!"
"Say, Alice, gi' me a couple
O' them two for five cigars,
Will yer?"
"Where's your nickel?"
"My! Ain't you close!
Can't trust a feller, can yer."
"Trust you! Why
What you owe this store

Would set you up in business.
I can't think why Father 'lows it."
"Yer Father's a sight more neighborly
Than you be. That's a fact.
Besides, he knows I got a vote."
"A vote! Oh, yes, you got a vote.
A lot o' good the Senate'll be to Father
When all his bank account
Has run away in credits."

This is prosier than the worst of Masters. "Reaping" and "Number Three on the Docket" have themes which might be treated poetically by, say, Robert Frost; but their handling is prosy and fragmentary in the extreme.

There is another characteristic strain, which introduces us to the outskirts of the delirium mood of modern verse. The following tidbit is culled from "Stravinsky's Three Pieces, 'Grotesques,' for String Quartette":

Bang! Bump! Tong!
Petticoats,
Stockings,
Sabots,
Delirium flapping its thigh-bones;
Red, blue, yellow,
Drunkenness steaming in colours,
Red, yellow, blue,
Colours and flesh weaving together,
Pigs' cries white and tenuous,
White and painful,
White and—
Bump!
Tong!

This may be an adequate interpretation of the music referred to; nothing can make it poetry. With the exception of "Patterns," which is a success in its way, and bright flashes in the longer things, the volume is unim-

portant. There is skill, almost gymnastic skill, in the singing; there are coloratura wavers and trills galore; there is the tintinnabulant embroidery of Liszt variations upon a trivial theme. But what shall it profit a poet, if he gain the whole world of verse technique, and have nothing to say?

Pictures of the Floating World contains many lovely fragments offered as poems. At their best, these "Lacquer Prints" are pretty epigrams; at their worst they are unimportant collocations of words. One, "An Artist," contains a salutary lesson: telling how the anchorite Kisen, author of a thousand poems, threw nine hundred and ninety-nine of them into the river, since he held one alone worthy of preservation.

After reading pages of Miss Lowell's verse (there are 620 pages in this and the preceding volume, for instance), the profane have expressed the wish that she had gone Kisen one better. A few decorative pieces follow: "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," "The Garden by Moonlight," "Autumn." "Ely Cathedral" is sharp satire, on a low plane of poetry. "A Bather" is lovelier as a whole. Perhaps her most successful piece here is "A Decade," which is an effective metaphor, an extended epigram. It is an interesting question how much it would gain by poetic treatment, in the hands of a Frost or a Robinson, an Edna Millay or an Elinor Wylie. In its present form, it is what Sidney Lanier would call a poem outline. Rhythmically it passes; but it cries aloud for elaboration, if it is to rise above the unctuously clever.

The most effective single thing that Miss Lowell has done, among her longer experiments, is "Guns as Keys: and the Great Gate Swings," in the volume *Can Grande's Castle*. This book is written in "polyphonic prose." The name, the author says, is "perhaps a misleading title,

as it tends to make the layman think that this is a prose form. Nothing could be further from the truth." We shall see. The tale goes the literary rounds that its originator, M. Paul Fort, wrote for a French periodical which paid nothing for verse, and a little more for prose. The first few of his contributions appeared as verse; thereafter with commendable astuteness he had them set up as prose. Miss Lowell calls it the freest of all forms, allowing the writer to go from metrical verse to cadenced verse (her name for polyrhythmic verse) at will.

"Guns as Keys" is a splendid and effective piece of writing, of polyglot character, part verse and part prose. The prose passages describe Admiral Perry's trip to the Pacific:

Across the equator and panting down to Saint Helena, trailing smoke like a mourning veil. Jamestown jetty, and all the officers in the ship making at once for Longwood. Napoleon! Ah, tales—tales—with nobody to tell them. A bronze eagle caged by floating woodwork. A heart burst with beating on a flat drop-curtain of sea and sky. Nothing now but pigs in a sty. Pigs rooting in the Emperor's bedroom. God be praised, we have a plumed smoking ship to take us away from this desolation.

"Boney was a warrior
Away-i-oh;
Boney was a warrior,
John Francois."

"Oh, shut up, Jack, you make me sick. These pigs are like worms eating a corpse. Bah!"

As interludes we have softer pictures of Japan:

The ladies,
Wistaria Blossom, Cloth-in-Silk, and Deep Snow,
With their ten attendants,

Are come to Asakusa
To gaze at peonies.
To admire crimson-carmine peonies,
To stare in admiration at bomb-shaped, white and sulphur
peonies,
To caress with a soft finger

some eight more lines of peonies. It is a colorful thing; and "The Bronze Horses," which concludes the book, is even more colorful. Even the parts set up as verse are often innate prose. There is an appearance of meticulous faithfulness to historical accuracy; but there is neither the technique nor the selective and crescent emotion which poetry needs. It is an achievement of unique virtuosity, rather than poetry.

When the discussion of the Waste Land influence is reached, the claims for such a piece as the Stravinsky variations will be examined in full. There was nothing enduring in Miss Lowell's youngest manner; there was some technical excellence, and little more, in her second volume. "Men, Women, and Ghosts" rose to a slight eminence in the opening "Patterns," but thereafter bewildered by its experimentation, rather than convinced by the stuff or the attire of poetry. The fragmentary pictures of the floating world, the four colorful daubs in *Can Grande's Castle,* are rooted in books and only rarely get within commuting distance of poetry.

It is hazardous to discuss definitions of poetry; but of all the manifold endeavors, that of Ruskin seems most satisfactory to the generations that have followed him. To paraphrase his statement, poetry is the expression in musical words of thoughts which appeal to the high and noble emotions, or their opposites. The phrase "musical words" needs further elaboration: the "Gettysburg Address" is indubitably music, and in the main prose. By

the phrase is meant words whose rhythm tends toward unity, rather than variety. We would then define: Poetry is the expression of thought which appeals to the high and noble emotions, or their opposites, in words whose rhythm tends toward unity, rather than variety. The rhythmic test is a mechanical matter, to be finally analyzed in the laboratory; there are passages unquestionably verse (the name for the technique of poetry) and other passages indisputably prose; and there is a wide borderland where the doctors may with profit disagree. The test of content is a subjective test: what is poetry to John Jones may be sheerest prose to Tom Smith; the former may prefer "Curfew Shall Not Ring Tonight," the latter "Lycidas" and "Ode to the West Wind"—in which case the declamatory ballad is poetry to the one, and the deep lyrics are poetry to the other. There is fitly no poetic yard-stick, no inevitable touchstone, no litmus paper whose reaction is the inerrant red for poetry and blue for prose. Each man must be his own critic, whether he utter from the solitude of his contemplation a "Biographia Literaria," or decide that all poetry is in the quatrain:

> Dr. Jones fell in the well,
> And died without a moan;
> He should have tended to the sick,
> And let the well alone.

Criticism is as solitary as creation. Men may compare opinions, and thereafter alter them; but the opinion brews in the loneliness within, and the alteration takes place in the same lonely cave of self. The race listens to the discordant clamor of the rival advocates, and in the end that hypothesis called the race mind eases itself of the task of examining everything written, by accepting

the opinions of this worthy one, that unworthy one: until it becomes a canon of the race's thinking that Coleridge is a poet, and Pye is not. But each man, in greater or less degree, must examine this transmitted decree for himself: "If it be not poetry to me, what care I what stuff it be?"

On the technical side, Miss Lowell is a glittering craftsman, lacking the genius of those who unerringly choose the patterns and tunes suitable to their words. She elects to desert her craft not infrequently for prose rhythms, tending toward variety. On the side of content, she fails more often; it is rare that she evokes in the mature mind that emotional response which comes from any of two-score poets who might be named offhand among the world's greatest; even that inner glow which is awakened by many American singers elsewhere treated. She has unbounded energy of utterance, as men go, and an elastic vocabulary. When she seeks to tell a story, it most often grovels into melodrama; when she turns to Nature, it is commonly a grotesque Catherine Wheel of pyrotechnic bewilderment; when she turns to historcial scenes, of which she is fond, it is the external glitter that trots brilliantly on, with none of that astringent compression that marks the ballad, or that wide-gestured abandon that opens into the epic. She is the brilliant failure in modern poetry: a polyphonic Joshua leading a crew, with a strong bedlam contingent, seven times seven times round and round about the walls of the poetic Jericho, which disobligingly fail to fall at her trumpet blast. It is a trumpet which she affects; and it peals less than it bleats.

CHAPTER XIV

Vachel Lindsay: Jazz and the Poet

The Norman came upon the Anglo-Saxon in one of his frequent moods of penitential groveling, of somber abasement before a Fate breathing blackly. The Norman came with a song on his lips, a laugh in his heart:

> The time will come when caste will fall,
> And lofty kings be slain with laughter.

The time has been, too; and the Gargantuan mirth of the Channel conquerors drove the bleak deities of their Teutonic cousins to worm into a serf's low lot for long low years. But the worm bored inward: and there have been periodic reappearances of his depressing philosophy and his cerement living. America has been ridden with these ticking borers since Plymouth Rock echoed hollowly to the first iron step. Today we are in the throes of one of the typical Puritanic miasmas, attested by a contagion of movements and prohibitions whose apparent ultimate aim is to abolish laughter and song forever. But this is an old wives' tale in the diverging history of the English peoples: the same somber mood spoke, beside healthier tongues, in serf rebellions, in Roundhead triumphs, in much of the eighteenth-century thinking. It was phrased with succinct perfection in the simple words of Rev. Nicholas Carter to his daughter Elizabeth, a translator of Epictetus:

You seem extremely fond of her (Mrs. Rowe's) writings. I have seen some that have in them a tincture of enthusiasm. 'Tis proper to caution you not to read them with too much pleasure. Enthusiasm grows upon us insensibly.

That morbid son of a Methodist god, Charles Wesley, muttered aloud:

The reproach of Christ I am willing to bear; but not the reproach of enthusiasm.

With the romantics came a rebirth of enthusiasm and gusto; but these were in time thinned by the Victorians into at the end a passable semblance of Wesleyan gloom. Gloom is a lean road to truth, winding through shriveled, harassed November landscapes; there are spring roads, and the Normans knew one of them. Vachel Lindsay has taken his reforming text from the purifiers in heart; but his utterance at his best is the yea-yawp of the glittering overseas conquerors.

On November 10, 1879, the poet was born in Springfield, Illinois. He graduated from the Springfield High School, attended Hiram College for three years, and studied at the Art Institute in Chicago and the New York School of Art. He has never married, and has devoted his life to preaching a long sermon on localized beauty. He has lectured for Y. M. C. A.'s and Anti-Saloon Leagues; he has been on odd evangelical tramping trips, from Illinois to New Mexico, through the industrial East, and as far south as Florida—peddling his rhymes for transient bed and board, and exhorting for his "Gospel of Beauty." He has published four or five volumes of verse, a study of the motion pictures, two whimsical narratives of his wanderings, and many pamphlets and dodgers. He is still living in Springfield,

with occasional chanting trips as near as the next village or as far as London. One of his rules of the road indicates his unique conception of tramping: "Be neat, deliberate, chaste, and civil." Most of his brothers of the road are stumped by the very first of these. It is good advice, and therefore anathema to the insuppressive perverse in man.

One of his preoccupations is reshaping his native Springfield toward beauty. His advice to me, given years ago, is characteristic of his lifelong attitude; it was given with energetic gravity: "There are two things you ought to do: go back and stay in Birmingham, Alabama; and join the Salvation Army." His gospel is a mystic patchwork, containing such obvious enthusiasms as "Bad Taste Is Mob-law; Good Public Taste Is Democracy." He has wandered the New World to impress upon each man he met the supreme importance of abiding at one's own hearthside: a fantastic blend G. K. Chesterton has seductively elaborated on several occasions. The practice has been foreshadowed by a greater teacher, who might have said that a man must lose his home to find it. Vachel Lindsay has wandered from Charing Cross to Macon, Georgia, from the Congo to Heaven, from the Hills of Han to Simon Legree's carefree hell: he has found himself at home in all of them.

His virtue is the discovery of the thumping beauty in usual things; his vice, a pathetic lack of discrimination which made him at least once prefer his treacly verses to Mary Pickford to the orotund splendor of *The Congo.* In *The Kallyope Yell,* published in 1913, he commenced with a yawp as American as P. T. Barnum, and as unlike Whitman as "Tam o' Shanter" differs from "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!" It is music, as the best of Lindsay is: the voice, the author might explain,

should simulate the metallic liquidity of the steam piano in rendering it:

I am the Kallyope, Kallyope, Kallyope,
Tooting hope, tooting hope, tooting hope, tooting hope; . . .
SHRIEKING of the better years.
Prophet-singers will arise,
Prophets coming after me,
Sing my song in softer guise,
With more delicate surprise;
I am but the pioneer
Voice of the Democracy;
I am the gutter-dream,
I am the golden dream,
Singing science, singing steam.
I will blow the proud folk down,
(Listen to the lion roar!)
I am the Kallyope, Kallyope, Kallyope,
Tooting hope, tooting hope, tooting hope, tooting hope,
Willy willy willy wah HOO!
Hoot toot, hoot toot, hoot toot, hoot toot,
Whoop whoop, whoop whoop,
Whoop whoop, whoop whoop,
Willy willy willy wah HOO!
Sizz. . . .
Fizz. . . .

"General William Booth Enters Into Heaven," title poem of his first volume, which appeared the same year, was a new note in American poetry, and a queerly successful one:

Booth led boldly with his big bass drum—
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
The Saints smiled gravely, and they said: "He's come."
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,
Lurching bravos from the ditches dank,
Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale—
Minds still passion-ridden, soul-powers frail:—

Vermin-eaten saints with mouldy breath,
Unwashed legions with the ways of Death—
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)

They suffered a Heaven-change:

The banjos rattled and the tambourines
Jing-jing-jingled in the hands of Queens.

And when Booth halted by the curb for prayer
He saw his Master thro' the flag-filled air.
Christ came gently with a robe and crown
For Booth the soldier, while the throng knelt down.
He saw King Jesus. They were face to face,
And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place.
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

His is not "that reconciliation of faith and science, this discovery of a father near at hand within the inexorable law of evolution . . . (that) we call the Victorian compromise," as Paul Elmer More sharply phrased it; his is a simpler faith:

Within their gutters, drunkards dream of Hell.
I say my prayers by my white bed tonight,
With the arms of God about me, with the angels singing, singing,
Until the grayness of my soul grows white.

How many poets have said, or could say, that second line in sincerity? He phrases his belief definitely in this volume:

God has great estates beyond the line,
Green farms for all, and meat and corn and wine.

There is no more vision here than in a Methodist bishop; but it is saturated with sincerity. He brings God

into direct human affairs, as in "Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket":

> Come, let us vote against our human nature,
> Crying to God in all the polling places
> To heal our everlasting sinfulness
> And make us sages with transfigured faces.

Anglo-Saxon Puritanism, of course, is always "against our human nature"; it sees in man an everlasting sinfulness; and the odd remedy, this juvenile conception of Socialism, will turn the voters into "sages with transfigured faces." This is an unexpected vision of Marx, Lenin, Trotzky. We find in anything what we look for: some find in a running brook good fishing; some, books; some, a mirror for God; some, a reflection of the stellar universe, as fenced by Einstein and rigidified by Ouspensky. If we can smile at this Lindsay, we can at least applaud the forthright vehemence of "To the United States Senate," on the seating of Lorimer:

> And must the Senator from Illinois
> Be this squat thing, with blinking, half-closed eyes?
> This brazen gutter idol, reared to power
> Upon a leering pyramid of lies? . . .
>
> Too many weary men shed honest tears,
> Ground by machines that give the Senate ease.
> Too many little babes with bleeding hands
> Have heaped the fruits of empire on your knees.
>
> And swine within the Senate in this day,
> When all the smothering by-streets weep and wail,
> When wisdom breaks the hearts of her best sons;
> When kingly men, voting for truth, may fail:—
>
> These are a portent and a call to arms.

But portents do not arouse the blind; and calls to arms fall lightly on deaf ears and asses' ears.

In *The Congo* (1914), the poet reached the peak of his singing. Some time before, G. K. Chesterton, one of the two or three most important poets across the water, had set to deathless music the martial crusade of "Lepanto":

Dim drums throbbing in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half attainted stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,
That once went singing southward when all the world was young.
In that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid,
Comes up along a winding road the noise of the Crusade.
Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,
Don John of Austria is going to the war,
Stiff flags straining in the night-blasts cold,
In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old-gold,
Torchlight crimson on the copper kettle-drums,
Then the tuckets, then the trumpets, then the cannon, and he comes,
Don John laughing in the brave beard curled,
Spurning of his stirrups like the thrones of all the world,
Holding his head up for a flag of all the free.
Love-light of Spain—hurrah!
Death-light of Africa!
Don John of Austria
Is riding to the sea.

It was this music, called to the poet's attention by a literary friend, which came to a new native birth in that vigorous baritone solo, *The Congo:*

Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,
Barrel-house kings, with feet unstable,

Sagged and reeled and pounded on the table,
Pounded on the table,
Beat an empty barrel with the handle of a broom,
Hard as they were able,
Boom, boom, BOOM,
With a silk umbrella and the handle of a broom,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM.
THEN I had religion, THEN I had a vision,
I could not turn from their revel in derision.
THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK,
CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST WITH A GOLDEN TRACK.
Then along that riverbank
A thousand miles
Tattooed cannibals danced in files;
Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust song
And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan gong.
And "BLOOD" screamed the whistles and the fifes of the warriors,
"BLOOD" screamed the skull-faced, lean witch-doctors,
"Whirl ye the deadly voo-doo rattle,
Harry the uplands,
Steal all the cattle,
Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle,
Bing,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM."
A roaring, epic, ragtime tune
From the mouth of the Congo
To the Mountains of the Moon.

Lindsay has a tune for all of this, too; and the repetitions and roars, meaningless on eye reading, fit, when rightly rendered, into a large scheme of song. The mood progresses through an idyl of Congo joys to a more serious vein of Negro sermonizing, which brought about "a land transfigured, . . . a new creation." *The Congo* is indeed a singing wind sweeping through the American nation.

The second poem in this book, *The Santa-Fé Trail,* is as successful, and is more innately American in theme. There is a deeper faithfulness to today in making a symphony out of a road humming with motor cars, than in repeating the more familiar music of savage jungle and Chinese tapestry. As a soft counter-chorus to the raucous roar of the motors comes the song of the bird, the Rachel-Jane, and this typical flight of whimsey:

> I want live things in their pride to remain.
> I would not kill one grasshopper vain
> Though he eats a hole in my shirt like a door.
> I let him out, give him one chance more.
> Perhaps, while he gnaws my hat in his whim,
> Grasshopper lyrics occur to him.

At the same time, a more careful craftsman would have avoided the displacement in the first line, the inversion in the second. The third of these chants, "The Firemen's Ball," is a Buddhistic moral tag appended to a booming fire-engine tune; it is Buddha, of course, as seen by the eyes of Springfield, Illinois. Awkward as this blend is, it is hardly a foretaste of the Sunday-school side-show that follows. There are charming moon whimseys, "The Spice Tree" being especially magical. With shrewd effect comes the satire of "What the Moon Saw," "Factory Windows are Always Broken," and this rounded "The Leaden-Eyed":

> Let not young souls be smothered out before
> They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.
> It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,
> Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.
> Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly,
> Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,
> Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve,
> Not that they die, but that they die like sheep.

This is strong in its music, wide in its vision. But the remainder of the volume is tasteless bon-bons, or sober moralizing to the hillocked tune of:

> Oh, thrice-painted dancer, vaudeville dancer,
> Sad in your spangles, with soul all astrain,
> *I* know a dancer, *I* know a dancer
> Whose laughter and weeping are spiritual gain.

Admirers of the worthwhile in Lindsay's singing felt that he could not go much lower than this. The next volume revealed how wrong they were. "The Chinese Nightingale," which opens the book, is an exquisite chant, lighter and lovelier than any sustained poem preceding it. "Here's to the Mice" is sharp satire; "The Broncho that Would Not Be Broken of Dancing" is effective; "Simon Legree," especially, of the Booker Washington Trilogy, is a strong negro study; there is a hint of excellence in a few other chants. But page after page declaims on:

> When Bryan speaks, the wigwam shakes.
> The corporation magnate quakes.
> The pre-convention plot is smashed.
> The valiant pleb full-armed awakes.
>
> When Bryan speaks, the sky is ours,
> The wheat, the forests, and the flowers.
> And who is here to say us nay?
> Fled are the ancient tyrant powers.

Few things as unintentionally funny as "The Bankrupt Peace Maker" have ever been emitted by a poet of any standing:

> Then he pulled out the nails. He shouted "Come in."
> To heal me there stepped in a lady of sin.

This deferential description is reminiscent of wash- and similar "ladies."

Her hand was in mine. We walked in the sun.
She said: "Now forget them, the Saxon and Hun.
You are dreary and aged and silly and weak.
Let us smell the sweet groves. Let the summertime speak."

The Puritan conception of evil, it may be noted, is to smell the sweet groves and let the summertime speak.

We walked to the river. We swam there in state.
I was a serpent. She was my mate.

His sentence structure at times is as elaborate as page three of the modern First Reader. "This is a boy. That is a girl. Does the boy like the girl? You said it!"

I forgot in the marsh, as I tumbled about,
That trial in my room, when I did not hold out.
Since I was a serpent, my mate seemed to me
As a mermaiden seems to a fisher at sea,
Or a whiskey-soaked girl to a whiskey-soaked king.

"This, My Song, is Made for Kerensky" is an appalling philippic, almost as funny:

The soldiers of the Lord may be squeaky when they rally,
The soldiers of the Lord are a queer little army,
But the soldiers of the Lord, before the year is through,
Will gather the whole nation, recruit all creation,
To smite the hosts abhorred, and all the heavens renew—
Enforcing with the bayonet the thing the ages teach—
Free speech!
Free speech!

Down with the Prussians, and all their works,
Down with the Turks.

Down with every army that fights against the soap-box,
The Pericles, Socrates, Diogenes soap-box,
The old Elijah, Jeremiah, John-the-Baptist soap-box,
The Rousseau, Mirabeau, Danton soap-box,
The Karl Marx, Henry George, Woodrow Wilson soap-box.
We will make the wide earth safe for the soap-box.

And so it stage-thunders on; while the land to whom it was addressed set about renewing the heavens by means of free speech; for a start jailing Eugene V. Debs and other enthusiasts of "the Karl Marx, Henry George, Woodrow Wilson soapbox." Perhaps the low song mark of the volume is "The Drunkard's Funeral"—although other verses belligerently dispute this reverse accolade:

That fellow in the coffin led a life most foul,
A fierce defender of the red bar-tender,
At the church he would rail,
At the preacher he would howl.
He planted every deviltry to see it grow.
He wasted half his income on the lewd and low.
He would trade engender for the red bar-tender,
He would homage render to the red bar-tender,
And in ultimate surrender to the red bar-tender
He died of the tremens, as crazy as a loon . . .

"The moral,
The conclusion,
The verdict now you know:
'The saloon must go,
The saloon,
The saloon,
The saloon,
Must go.'"

The saloon went; this verse remains. After this, we could expect anything.

"The Golden Whales of California," which came next,

has all of the vices, and nary a virtue, unless perhaps one or two lost lines of beauty:

> My heart is a kicking horse
> Shod with Kentucky steel.

With this might be mentioned the congruous phantasmagoria of "A Doll's 'Arabian Nights,'" and the characteristic "Another Word on the Scientific Aspiration." Of course, this is remote from poetry; but it is at least intelligible cleverness of no basement order. It is high above the rest of the book. The title poem has lines of this sort:

> Goshawfuls are Burbanked with the grizzly bears.
> At midnight their children come clanking up the stairs.
> They wriggle up the canyons,
> Nose into the caves,
> And swallow the papooses and the Indian braves.
> The trees climb so high the crows are dizzy
> Flying to their nests at the top.
> While the jazz-birds screech, and storm the brazen beach,
> And the sea-stars turn flip-flop.

"Kalamazoo" is perilously close to drivel; "John L. Sullivan, the Strong Boy of Boston" contains a nice catalog of the fads of 1889, but cannot be stretched into poetry. "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan" is as poetic as its title, with lyric touches like:

> Oh the long horns from Texas,
> The jay hawks from Kansas,
> The plop-eyed bungaroo and giant giassicus,
> The varmint, chipmunk, bugaboo . . .
> The rakaboor, the hellangone,
> The whangdoodle, batfowl and pig

—named among the other supporters of Bryan.

Election night at midnight:
Boy Bryan's defeat.
Defeat of western silver.
Defeat of the wheat.
Victory of letterfiles
And plutocrats in miles
With dollar signs upon their coats,
Diamond watchchains on their vests
And spats on their feet.

By the time we have read this far, we are frankly surprised that the watchchains were not on the feet, the spats on their vests. There is an unexpected note of stately music in the conclusion of this. Then there is "The Daniel Jazz," with lines as mildly amusing as:

His sweetheart and his mother were Christian and meek.
They washed and ironed for Darius every week.
He said: "Your Daniel is a dead little pigeon.
He's a good hard worker, but he talks religion."

One of the least objectionable lines of the poem is:

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

The poet tried to write a serious tribute to Joyce Kilmer, a young American singer who died in the war: this is his opening:

I hear a thousand chimes,
I hear ten thousand chimes,
I hear a million chimes
In heaven.
I see a thousand bells,
I see ten thousand bells
I see a million bells
In heaven.

There is much else as depressing, in a less mathematical way.

Here we have the gradual degradation of a great gift. Lindsay had from the start a burly, swaggering man-music, at times as softly sweet as bells heard over a hill, at times as enormous as the rumbling thunder deafening in the bell-tower. He had a homelier music than "Lepanto," a blazing rainbow of colors, a gaiety like "Tam o' Shanter," a vivid primitive pictorial sense. If his equipment had stopped with these, he could hardly have abased his singing to its present state. One thing more he had: a Sunday-school conscience; one thing he lacked: discrimination. Much of the early singing was vigorous, gusty poetry: the later notes are mere robot roars—the metallic yawps of a Frankinstein's monster.

Something may be said concerning the causes of this downward progression. *The Congo* and its fellow chants were great, not because they brushed jazz, but because they were poetry. The few sharp social satires were effective because they were sharp authentic satires, not because they dealt with phases of reform. It is quite conceivable that Lindsay, a popular platform reader, has faced many audiences who admired the first group for their quality of noisy syncopation; it is unquestionable that he has in himself a persistent audience which admires the satires because they voice a moral judgment. Syncopation for a method, reform for a theme, became his practice. Worst of all, he read in certain eyes that he was expected to be a cheap vaudevillian, a slapstick minstrel entertainer. They guffawed at the blare and the jitney comedy; and these are all he gives today, except for an occasional soapbox sermon. It is a painful thing for a deep admirer of the genuine music of Lindsay:

There, where the wild ghost-gods had wailed
A million boats of the angels sailed,
With oars of silver, and prows of blue,
And silken pennants that the sun shone through.

And now I hear, as I sit all alone
In the dusk, by another big Santa-Fe stone,
The souls of the tall corn gathering around,
And the gay little souls of the grass in the ground.

"Who shall end my dream's confusion.
Life is a loom, weaving illusion . . .
I remember, I remember
There were ghostly veils and laces . . .
In the shadowy bowery places . . .
With lovers' ardent faces
Bending to one another,
Speaking each his part.
They infinitely echo
In the red cave of my heart . . .
'Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart,'
They said to one another.
They spoke, I think, of perils past.
They spoke, I think, of peace at last.
One thing I remember:
Spring came on forever,
Spring came on forever,"
Said the Chinese nightingale.

We have rarely encountered a strain in all modern poetry as haunting and enduringly beautiful as these lines, as delivered by the poet himself. And now we must grit our teeth against this stone for bread:

Then Hanna to the rescue, . . .
Invading misers' cellars,
Tin-cans, socks,
Melting down the rocks,
Pouring out the long green to a million workers,

Spondulix by the mountain-load, to stop each new tornado,
And beat the cheapskate, blatherskite,
Populistic, anarchistic,
Deacon—desperado.

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr! — It is a wrenching thing to turn from the poetry above, to the poetic poverty that has succeeded it. The later things are amusing, as Happy Hooligan was amusing, as Billy Sunday is amusing. To this Lindsay has descended: a petty destination, for him whose goal was "the mystery the beggars win."

Vachel Lindsay's position in our poetry is established by the early chants and lyrics. A kindly future can do him no greater service than to supply the discrimination he lacks; to elide the drivel he has uttered; and to preserve the golden residue of his genuine music.

CHAPTER XV

Carl Sandburg: a Hymn from Hogwallow

Poetry and life are an ill-mated pair. No other conclusion can be drawn from their frequent tiffs, long separations, and diminishing reconciliations. Yet life is less than life without poetry; and poetry is lost without life. The history of the art is a record of constant divorces from reality, with ever a less whole-hearted reunion. This grows from the sheep proclivity of man: the trait of shrining a work of art as a Medes-and-Persians pattern, which must be followed to the last fringe on the High Priest's robe. During the ensuing age of slavish imitation, life moves ahead. The split continues until an innovating genius brings life into poetry again, with some rude factual discord. Meanwhile, life has increased in multiplying complexity; and the marriage-brokerage of our genius brings back to poetry only his individual contacts, which are only a limited portion of what life has been achieving. In course of time his rebellion becomes the orthodox norm, with another slug era of copying. Over and over again the process is repeated: and life expands ever farther and further beyond the snobbish fenced yard of its partial reflector, poetry.

The Homeric poems included most of the activities of the men of that day: although there is danger of seeing any hour through the tinted glasses of that typical

human mood, the illusion of the golden past. It is at least true that early Greek singing was closer to the living of that day than ours is to our life. Fighting, loving, hunting, all these spread their wealth of detail in the thunder and surge of the old epics. "The changes of the year, the harvesting, the vine-dressing, the sacred and the secular feasts, the mourning for the dead, the praise of heroes—all are remembered in the lyric ritual," says Ernest Rhys. At the moment when all of Israel but the apers of city fashions still herded sheep as the all of a race's industry, her poet sang his golden catalog, "The Lord is my shepherd." We would feel a strain of uncouthness in a modern poem commencing, "The Lord is my factory boss," "The Lord is the president of my national bank." There was once no sense of strain. But, Lord preserve us, the ages have grown so many professorial critics and academic singers, whose offering is only a dilution of yesterday's songs, that the domain of poetry has shrunk and narrowed far away from the multitudinous ways of men. The high philosophizing is still permitted, the more general emotions: life, death, the seasons, the unroofed beauty of Nature, the vista of a city: love, hate—all these pour the tea for our singing. Human arts and skills that have grown hoary with age may be luted: agriculture, hunting, the village blacksmith, grave-digging in Elsinore. Anything which has the glamor of other years is welcomed—never forgetting certain racial taboos. But modern activities —the technique of automobile production, the ups and down of a hysteric day in Wall Street, the actual life of a union workman of today, the actual life of a trust magnate or corporation lawyer—these have been branded "Unclean!" by the academic health-officers of poetry, and have been placed under a quarantine which may last

for centuries. Let prose handle such themes, they decree: and prose does its best. But in these activities lie many of the terrible trifles that spell heaven or hell to men living today; and there is every reason why poetry must recapture step by step this living ground.

This is what the genuine innovators in poetry have often done. Chaucer did not go far behind to paint his breathing portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims; Crabbe, Wordsworth, Burns, Synge, Masefield, in greater or less degree, dealt with the life around them. Whitman broadened the domain of our singing with astonishing reach. Frost has brought a soil taste to modern singing, Masters has turned up a darker soil with his home-made spade. Carl Sandburg has gone further than any of these singers in endeavoring to make poetry at home in the home, the office, the workplace of men whose lives have not yet been blurred to a pretty mist by the retreating years.

The poet was born January 6, 1878, in Galesburg, Illinois, of a Swedish immigrant, August Johnson, who altered his name to Sandburg because of the number of August Johnsons on the railroad construction payroll. The father had three months of schooling altogether; his wife had two. Until he was thirteen, the son went to school; at that unripe age he started earning his own bread. Milk-wagon driver, porter in a barber shop, scene-shifter, trucker at brick kilns, pottery workman—all before he was seventeen: this was his early apprenticeship to life, which poetry seeks to mirror. At seventeen he wandered West, washing dishes in Denver and Omaha hotels, pitching wheat in Kansas. He came back, and commenced to learn the painter's trade. He served during the Spanish-American War in Porto Rico, and was mustered out at the war's end with a hundred

dollars. This gave him a chance to purchase an education; he put in one year at Lombard College, in his home town. He received a West Point appointment, but stumbled on mathematics. He returned and finished at Lombard College, earning enough as tutor, bell-ringer, and gymnasium janitor to live from day to day. He began to write for college and local papers: and emerged from college a journalist, with a distinct socialistic tendency. After service in the organized movement, he split with it, and has since lived as a literary free lance. In 1908 he was married. He has published four volumes of poetry, *Chicago Poems* (1915), *Cornhuskers* (1918), *Smoke and Steel* (1920), and *Slabs of the Sunburnt West* (1922). Here we have the first thirty-seven years of his life spent in actual contact with working men, one among them, one out of them. Walt Whitman underwent a similar novitiate. It is not surprising to find his surging energy seeking at once to draw, no, to yank all this into his tunes.

It is difficult to treat adequately of Sandburg, because of his extent. He has never been a withholder of his song. He writes exclusively in polyrhythmic verse, of his own patterns, with a frequent use of slang. He is brutal, often grotesquely so; he is as tender, at times, as a cat to her injured young. His first note is to his Chicago:

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler,
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.
And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.
And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:
Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.

This is of course a partial picture: the part usually ignored. Let the over-civilized critic call it the song of a barbarian; there are virtues in such song, as truly as there are vices in the suavest culture. He has qualities here that Whitman lacks: a more shaped music, a vision closer to actual people. He has faults which Whitman lacked: a scantiness of vista, a skill in detail which fails before totality. The book is filled with human beings, as this "Jew Fish crier":

He dangles a herring before prospective customers evincing a joy identical with that of Pavlowa dancing.
His face is that of a man terribly glad to be selling fish, terribly glad that God made fish, and customers to whom he may call his wares from a pushcart.

There is an amazing gift of objectivity here: his to see, to tell, and yours to interpret. He sees cleanly, as in "Muckers":

Twenty men stand watching the muckers.
Stabbing the sides of the ditch
Where clay gleams yellow,
Driving the blades of their shovels
Deeper and deeper for the new gas mains,

Wiping sweat off their faces
With red bandanas.
The muckers work on . . . pausing . . . to pull
Their boots out of the suckholes where they slosh.

Of the twenty looking on
Ten murmur, "Oh, it's a hell of a job,"
Ten others, "Jesus, I wish I had the job."

"Graceland," "Child of the Romans," "The Right to Grief," "Onion Days," "Ice Handler," "Mag," "Fellow Citizens," are amazingly successful in similar moods. "Anna Imroth" adds his own judgment:

But all of the others got down and they are safe and this is the only one of the factory girls who wasn't lucky in making the jump when the fire broke.
It is the hand of God and the lack of fire escapes.

No matter how colloquial he becomes, there is an abiding difference between his music and that of Masters. The latter was always prosy, or an awkward approximation of verse rhythms; Sandburg knows his music thoroughly, and uses it with almost invariable deftness. His matter may be casual or worthless, but his skill persists. In "A Fence" and "Limited" the overtone of interpretation grows stronger, with splendid effect. At times his method parrots his low original so closely that the effect, powerful to all, offends the thin-skinned, as in that bitter counterblast to Billy Sunday, "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter":

You come along . . . tearing your shirt . . . yelling about Jesus.
Where do you get that stuff?
What do you know about Jesus?

You come along squirting words at us, shaking your fist and calling us all dam fools so fierce the froth slobbers over your lips . . . always blabbing we're all going to hell straight off and you know all about it . . .
I say the same bunch backing you nailed the nails into the hands of this Jesus of Nazareth. He had lined up against him the same crooks and strong-arm men now lined up with you paying your way.

This is magnificent literature, in its utter fidelity to its foul-mouthed original, and its clean high indignation at those who traffic in the doves within the temple. His war poems are strong and true. Out of this ugliness he can pass into older beauty:

I came sudden, at the city's edge,
On a blue burst of lake,
Long lake waves breaking under the sun
On a spray-flung curve of shore;
And a fluttering storm of gulls,
Masses of great gray wings
And flying white bellies
Veering and wheeling free in the open.

Here, as in other places, he has evoked, with old vision and fresh phrasing, that beauty that is not eternal, but that was old when our eyes were young, and will be young when there are no eyes. He is subdued to that he works in, as "Fog" witnesses:

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

It is a great volume, and his most sustained height.

Cornhuskers opens with a longer attempt, "Prairie," as fragmentary as "Song of Myself," but without the

coherency of Whitman poems of the same length, such as the Lincoln threnody and the sea chant. Sandburg is better in the complete surrender to nature in a poem like "River Roads":

Let the woodpecker drum and drum on a hickory stump.
He has been swimming in red and blue pools somewhere
hundreds of years
And the blue has gone to his wings and the red has gone to
his head.
Let his red head drum and drum.

There is a tired abandon here that is wholly persuasive. In "Loam" and "Cool Tombs" he reaches a lovely height of music; he has caught living people again in "Bricklayer Love," "Song of Those Who Go Forth Before Daylight," and this poignant "Girl in a Cage":

Some days it's fun
to finger the dollars
Some days . . .
the dollars keep on
in a sob or a whisper:
A flame of rose in the hair,
A flame of silk at the throat.

"Southern Pacific" has the stern judgment of "A Fence": "Prayer in Steel" is a cry for modern utility. "Knucks," the picture of the low state of Abraham Lincoln's city today, is not a pretty picture; and the war etchings gain in intensity and music. A new note has crept in, "Caboose Thoughts" and "Potato Blossom Songs and Jigs"—a direct monologue of the American lowbrow:

But I've been around.
I know some of the boys here who can go a little.
I know girls good for a burst of speed any time . . .

Last summer we took the cushions going west.
Pike's Peak is a big old stone, believe me.
It's fastened down; something you can count on.

It's going to come out all right—do you know?
The sun, the birds, the grass—they know.
They get along—and we'll get along.

Even in this a slight touch of affectation has crept in; and this is a note that grows like a beanstalk in other verses. It is hardly lifting to learn of the poet, "O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie, inside my ribs," with an inventory of the jungle denizens and their master. There are more slight, unimportant pieces in this collection: it is at best an extension of *Chicago Poems*, worthy in many spots, but beginning to sag.

With *Smoke and Steel* the structure begins to collapse. The very themes dwindle, peak and pine toward insignificance. He cannot altogether escape the potential greatness so close to him, as a tongue for the stuttering crowd, whose blood has not yet chilled toward blue.

One of them said: "I like my job, the company is good to me, America is a wonderful country."
One: "Jesus, my bones ache; the company is a liar; this is a free country, like hell."

The most that Frost achieved was to utter meticulously his own oral speech; but Sandburg gets the speech of those around him. There is enormous intuition in such a sketch as "Five Towns on the B. & O.":

By night . . . all lit up . . . fire-gold bars, fire-gold flues . . . and all the shanties shaking in clumsy shadows . . . almost the hills shaking . . . all crooning: By God, we're going to find out or know why.

"The Mayor of Gary" is a sharp picture of the social chasm; and "Cahoots" lets the parasites speak with brilliant perception:

Play it across the table.
What if we steal this city blind?
If they want anything let 'em nail it down.

Harness bulls, dicks, front office men,
And the high goats up on the bench,
Ain't they all in cahoots?
Ain't it fifty-fifty all down the line,
Petemen, dips, boosters, stick-ups and guns—
what's to hinder?
Go fifty-fifty.
If they nail you call in a mouthpiece.
Fix it, you gazump, you slant-head, fix it.
Feed 'em.

Nothin' ever sticks to my fingers, nah, nah,
nothin' like that,
But there ain't no law we got to wear mittens—
huh—is there?
Mittens, that's a good one—mittens!
There oughta be a law everybody wear mittens.

This is actual speech as genuine as the best in Ring Lardner, J. V. A. Weaver, or their slangy ilk; and it is straight talk, in a way they rarely approach. "The Sins of Kalamazoo" is a vast improvement on Lindsay's scrambled ballad of the same town; but it is not sustained. "Flash Crimson" is a better poem, another instance of his tight-lipped speech for courage:

There is one crimson pinch of ashes left after all; and none of the shifting winds that whip the grass and none of the pounding rains that beat the dust know how to touch or find the flash of this crimson.

I cry God to give me a broken foot, a scar, or a lousy death.

I who have seen the flash of this crimson, I ask God for the last and worst.

This is a mood that would not suffer for a delousing. There is charming ribaldry in "The Lawyers Know Too Much":

Why is there always a secret singing
When a lawyer cashes in?
Why does a hearse horse snicker
Hauling a lawyer away?

The work of a bricklayer goes to the blue.
The knack of a mason outlasts a moon.
The hands of a plasterer hold a room together.
The land of the farmer wishes him back again.
Singers of songs and dreamers of plays
Build a house no wind blows over.
The lawyers—tell me why a hearse horse snickers
hauling a lawyer's bones.

"The Liars" is loud, and somewhat ineffective; although "New Farm Tractor" is closer to strength. "White Hands" is the Macbeth sleep-walking scene done up to the Main Street date; it is inoffensive rather than great. "Tawny" has a slender beauty. Some of these themes have significance; but there are enough where both theme and treatment are cheapening. This from "Eleventh Avenue Racket":

Whoop-de-doodle-de-doo.
Hoodle-de-harr-de-hum.
Nobody home? Everybody home.
Whoop-de-doodle-de-doo.

Mamie Riley married Jimmy Higgins last night; Eddie Jones died of whooping cough; George Hacks got a job on the police force; the Rosenheims bought a brass bed.

He has left poetry now. Take bits of studied pertness like "the inkfish, Shakespeare," the muscled author of "Barrack Room Ballads" saluted as "Kip,"—barber-shop cleverness substituted for something to say. There is nothing unhealthy in it; it is merely a cheap and indiscriminate inclusion. "Galoots" is worse; "Honky Tonk in Cleveland, Ohio" is further on the downward path, with its barroom anecdotage:

The banjo tickles and titters too awful.
The chippies talk about the funnies in the paper.
The cartoonists weep in their beer.
Ship riveters talk with their feet
To the feet of floozies under the tables.

There is nothing offensive in such material, if used with some design—in the artistic sense, not the moralizing; but this reportorial objectivity is the least of Whitman muddied in slang. Down and down it wilts, as in this uninspired tribute to John Brown:

They said: You for the fool killer,
you for the booby hatch,
and a necktie party.

and this from the story of a popular play:

What is there to a monicker? Call me anything.
A nut, a cheese, something that the cat brought in.
Nick me with any old name.
Class me up for a fish, a gorilla, a slant-head, an egg, a ham.

If this were all he had to say, we would follow the suggestion: this is the talk of a slant-head, to sum it up in the appropriate nutshell. But he is not at a loss for themes: this volume contains a hundred and ninety-two different poems, to use the casual meaning of the term, stretching to two hundred and sixty-seven pages. The children, says Sandburg, followed Pietro the five-cent balloon man as long as he had his balloons; when he sold out, he returned alone. This poet should huck his higher wares.

"Slabs of the Sunburnt West" carries on the tradition of deterioration. There is a new picture of Chicago, "The Windy City," from which we lift:

listen while they jazz the classics:

"Since when did you kiss yourself in
And who do you think you are?
Come across, kick in, loosen up,
Where do you get that chatter?" . . .

"You're trying to crab my act.
You poor fish, you mackerel,
You haven't got the sense God
Gave an oyster—it's raining—
What you want is an umbrella." . . .

"What we want is results, re-sults
And damn the consequences.
Sh . . . sh . . .
You can fix anything
If you got the right fixers." . . .

"Hush baby!
Shoot it,
Shoot it all!
Coo coo, coo coo"—
This is one song of Chicago.

Out of this he can dazzle with a flash of poetry:

> the fang cry, the rip claw hiss,
> the slant of the slit eyes waiting.

We can place beside Lindsay's line "Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr etc." this movement from Sandburg's "Washington Monument by Night":

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. . . . . .
. . . . . .

"And so Today," the weird poem to the Unknown Soldier, is downhill from the slangy bit quoted. "At the Gate of Tombs" has more excuse for being:

> If any fool, babbler, gabby mouth, stand up and say: Let us make a civilization where the sacred and beautiful things of toil and genius shall last—If any such noisy gazook stands up and makes himself heard—put him out—tie a can on him—lock him up in Leavenworth—shackle him in the Atlanta hoosegow—let him eat from the tin dishes at Sing Sing—slew him in as a lifer at San Quentin.

There is the abiding possibility that this would not have suffered from more white-collared treatment. There is the certainty that his forgotten craft of proper line division—at the natural point of breathing—would have aided it. It is much better, at that, than his Lardner translations of Indian and Arabian philosophy like "Crossing the Paces," than cryptic nonsense like "Two Humpties," than the prosy objectivity of "Hell on the Wabash," or the impressionistic handling of a canyon in the title poem:

An arm-chair for a one-eyed giant,
two pine-trees grow in the left arm of the chair;
a blue-jay comes, sits, goes, comes again;
a blue-jay shoots and twitters . . . out and across . . .
walls of crucifixions and wedding breakfasts;
ruin, ruin—a brute gnashed, dug, kept on—
kept on and quit: and this is It.

He has one strong note, heard from him before:

Call hallelujah, call amen, call deep thanks.
The strong men keep coming on.

Here is a man with sufficient contacts with unsung life, sufficient vision, and sufficient melody, to become the leading singer of today. He has an affirmative mood which permits flights of any height. Against this fight many innate qualities: a scrappiness of vision, a growing sanctification of the merely uncouth and insensitive, a vocabulary at times no more enduring than that of Villon's stunt ballade. Page after page in the last thin volume erupts with *humdinger, floocy, phizzogs, fixers, frame-ups, four-flushers, rakeoff, getaway, junk, fliv, fake, come clean, a 44-gat, galoot, gazook, gabby mouth, hoosegow, teameo, booby hatch, work plug, lovey, bull, scab, stiffs, hanky-pank, hokum, buddy.* This is an undoubted improvement on *silvern shoon;* but it limits the poet's audience today, and does more than decimate his admirers of tomorrow. Slang is last night's toadstool growth; some of it is trodden underfoot before the page that uses it leaves the presses. A few of its current phrases will enrich the persisting language; most will not. Whitman, by the use of unfamiliar rhythms, delayed his recognition, and has never reached the crowd he sought; Sandburg uses rhythms almost as unfamiliar, and has a vocabulary that tomorrow will speak only to the

specialized archeologist. The college curriculums of 1975 may bracket his work with Beowulf and the Ancren Riwle, as Old Midwestern American or Early Hogwallowan. It will take unusual vitality to overcome this handicap; Whitman, with his surging energy, could not make his goal.

America is not bright with critical intelligence; and this may be a large cause of an epidemic blight upon our singing. Masters uttered Spoon River, and slumped to "Dr. Scudder's Clinical Lecture"; Lindsay commenced with "The Congo," and wound down to "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan"; James Oppenheim in early exaltation sang "We Unborn," and ended in a slough of psychoanalytical maundering; Sandburg began on the heights, and ended singing the booby hatch. Robinson, Frost, Elinor Wylie, Edna Millay, sustained their first fine careful rapture; Wheelock deepened and strengthened his. But the tendency is the other way. The modern age in poetry commenced with "Richard Cory" and "North of Boston," and has arrived at "The Waste Land." We are a land cursed with the same indiscriminate rapture to salute greatness and maudlinity. I am perhaps too optimistic here, as I recall the receptions accorded "Merlin" and the Eliot poem. It is no wonder that the easier valley attracts, when we scatter the gold as lavishly there as on the scoring peaks.

The work that Sandburg commenced, of bringing life back into poetry, will go on. There may be delays, there will be cloistered consternation and sparrow recrimination; but in due time we should arrive at those tongues whose singing sweeps from Caliban to Lear—more accurately, from the one breathing extreme today to the other. If we do not find them, we will survive as a little more than the Hittites, a little less than the Carthaginians.

CHAPTER XVI

Elinor Wylie: the Jewelled Brain

Among women writing poetry in America, we have as yet had none with the breadth of contact of a Whitman or a Sandburg; none so adequate to sing a trade as Frost his tilling of the soil; none so polished professionally as Masters, the lawyer, or Lindsay, the reformer. Woman has gone by thousands into department stores, textile mills, factories; but she has not become vocal here. At the false dawn of our poetry, we found a slave woman, Phyllis Wheatley, singing cultivated songs; but no later laboring woman has written her name large on the roll of verse. If some among our women poets are, by profession, housewives, they give us only the parlor and sitting-room in their lines. Some come from the served classes; and their singing at times reaches a depth which a less limited environment might prohibit.

Elinor Wylie, born Elinor Hoyt, had the usual upbringing of a society girl in Washington, D. C., and was married first to a son of Admiral Hichborn, U. S. N. After a divorce, she was married to Horace Wylie, of the same city, and has since divorced him. She lives in New York City, and is wife of the poet, William Rose Benet. Her poetic output so far has been two volumes, *Nets to Catch the Wind* (1921) and *Black Armour* (1923). These entitle her, in the eyes of many critics, to high ranking.

Much of her singing moves beneath unhappy overtones, which is in all probability due to the circumstances of her life. It is known that she moved to New York to free herself of the unpleasing life at Washington; this speaks in the distaste of "August," in the first book, and more strongly in the carved beauty of the sonnet sequence "Wild Peaches," with the vigorous conclusion:

Down to the Puritan marrow of my bones
There's something in this richness that I hate.
I love the look, austere, immaculate,
Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones.
There's something in my very blood that owns
Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate,
A thread of water, churned to milky spate
Streaming through slanted pastures fenced with stones.

I love those skies, thin blue or snowy gray,
Those fields, sparse-planted, rendering meager sheaves;
That spring, briefer than apple-blossom'd breath,
Summer, so much too beautiful to stay,
Swift autumn, like a bonfire of leaves,
And sleepy winter, like the sleep of death.

With amazing intellectual vigor and clarity she builds a lasting cell to escape from the black rigor of life, in "Sanctuary":

This is the bricklayer; hear the thud
Of his heavy load dumped down on stone.
His lustrous bricks are brighter than blood,
His smoking mortar whiter than bone.

Set each sharp-edged, fire-bitten brick
Straight by the plumb-line's shivering length;
Make my marvelous wall so thick
Dead nor living may shake its strength.

Full as a crystal cup with drink
Is my cell with dreams, and quiet, and cool. . . .
Stop, old man! You must leave a chink;
How can I breathe? *You can't, you fool.*

"Winter Sleep" is in the same mood; and "Escape" phrases it with a magic less cerebral than rooted in the forgotten myths of the world:

When foxes eat the last gold grape,
And the last white antelope is killed,
I shall stop fighting and escape
Into a little house I'll build.

But first I'll shrink to fairy size,
With a whisper no one understands,
Making blind moons of all your eyes,
And muddy roads of all your hands.

And you may grope for me in vain
In hollows under the mangrove root,
Or where, in apple-scented rain,
The silver wasp-nests hang like fruit.

As a technician she is among the best; and while her music has less than the invariable witchery and charm of Miss Millay's, it is coldly and bitterly beautiful. The exquisite change of perspective at the close of the second stanza above is an instance of her fidelity to detail. "Fire and Sleet and Candlelight," one of her earliest poems, shows the black mood out of which the songs glittered:

There's a word unspoken,
  A knot untied.
Whatever is broken
  The earth may hide.

The road was jagged
  Over sharp stones;
Your body's too ragged
  To cover your bones. . . .

Your race is ended—
  See, it is run:
Nothing is mended
  Under the sun.

This is the despair of a shadow mood, rather than a continuing one. "Valentine" gives one activity of her bitterness:

Too high, too high to pluck
My heart shall swing.
A fruit no bee shall suck,
No wasp shall sting. . . .

Before my eyes are blind
And my lips mute,
I must eat core and rind
Of that same fruit. . . .

But I shall keep it sweet
By some strange art;
Wild honey I shall eat
When I eat my heart.

O honey cool and chaste
As clover's breath!
Sweet Heaven I shall taste
Before my death.

In the main, her poems are not objective; although in this respect her range is noticeably broadening. In the personal, she has phrased finely her twin desires for the height and the retreat, in "The Eagle and the Mole":

Avoid the reeking herd,
Shun the polluted flock,
Live like that stoic bird,
The eagle of the rock.

The huddled warmth of crowds
Begets and fosters hate;
He keeps, above the clouds,
His cliff inviolate.

When flocks are folded warm,
And herds to shelter run,
He sails above the storm,
He stares into the sun.

If in the eagle's track
Your sinews cannot leap,
Avoid the lathered pack,
Turn from the steaming sheep.

If you would keep your soul
From spotted sight or sound,
Live like the velvet mole;
Go burrow underground.

And there hold intercourse
With roots of trees and stones,
With rivers at their source,
And disembodied bones.

There is an acid scorn of democracy and the crowd in this: in a later poem she explains the reason for this. At times her verse stares into the sun, at times it holds intercourse with the cold death under the tree-roots. Neither locality is usual; and her work combines the tall glitter and the morbid retreat into one tense whole. This retreat assumes exquisite form, as in "Velvet Shoes." The desire to retreat makes her dispraise the world:

I bear the rainbow bubble Earth
Square on my scornful back.

"The Tortoise in Eternity," from which this is taken, is effective throughout. "A Crowded Trolley Car" shows how a casual theme is woven into her own mood. She ends her description of the passengers,

> Orchard of the strangest fruits
> Hanging from the skies;
> Brothers, yet insensate brutes
> Who fear each others' eyes.
>
> One man stands as free men stand,
> As if his soul might be
> Brave, unspoken; see his hand
> Nailed to an oaken tree.

This martyrdom note assumes vibrant form in "The Church Bell," made tongueless for its truth-telling; it reappears in the distinctive "The Crooked Stick," a little dialog ending:

First Traveler: It's the sort of crooked stick that shepherds know.
Second Traveler: Some one's loss!
First Traveler: Bend it, and you make of it a bow. Break it, a cross.
Second Traveler: But it's all grown over with moss!

Combine these various notes, and we have a poet whose ambition is to soar into the sun, as the eagle soars. She does not like crowds: for there has been a martyrdom. And so she shrinks to fairy size, and seeks the balm of escape. All of this is done in verse distinctive and beautiful; although a few of the poems are without especial significance.

Between her two volumes appeared T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land;* and in her critical capacity Mrs. Wylie blew a chilly blast of praise for that grotesque product:

If it were merely a piece of virtuosity it would remain astonishing; it would be a work of art. . . . But it is far more than this; it is infused with spirit and passion and despair, and it shoots up into stars of brilliance or flows down dying falls of music which nothing can obscure or silence.

The book, of course, is not worth a ha'penny of this guinea praise: it doesn't do any of the pretty things the critic pictures. It is dangerous to the integrity of an artist's product to coquette with this esoteric babble; and it is no surprise to find echoes of Eliot's blight in "Black Armour," as in "Demon Lovers":

> He wanders lonely as a cloud
> In chevelure of curled perruque;
> Masked assassins in a crowd
> Strangle the uxorious duke.
>
> Castilian facing Lucifer,
> Juan does not remove his cap;
> Unswaddled infantile to her
> His soul lies kicking in her lap.

Shall we say of this that its art reveals astonishing virtuosity, infused with despairing passion, with a meteoric glitter and a musing music which the ages cannot dull or degrade? We shall not: it is unswaddled infantile, and its little kicking soul deserves the maternal slipper. The pity of it is, that the same contagion touches poems as fine in part as "Full Moon," where the author pictures herself as

> Harlequin in lozenges
> Of love and hate, I walk in these
> Striped and ragged rigmaroles.

(Rigmarole: a succession of confused or foolish statements; balderdash; nonsense.—THE CENTURY DICTIONARY.) The word is apt to characterize the product. The poem mounts to a fine cerebral portrait:

> Mortality I could not tear
> From my ribs, to leave them bare
> Ivory in silver air.
>
> There I walked, and there I raged;
> The spiritual savage caged
> Within my skeleton, raged afresh
> To feel, behind a carnal mesh,
> The clean bones crying in the flesh.

This is kin to the desire to flee "this richness," in the sonnet first quoted: here it is brought closer to personalization, in the carnal mesh, which is attired in, and is kin to, the lozenges of love and hate. Here the cerebration is too refined to be effective: the very wish to escape is breathed cryptically. There is magical phrasing; but the tortuous search for the meaning begins to resemble a chess problem; and mankind leaves such for an insignificant fraction of itself. In "This Hand" she still moves in subtle shadows, but she has crossed the borderline of rigmarole and writes cerebral sense:

> Blue-veined and yellowish,
> Ambiguous to clasp,
> And secret as a fish,
> And sudden as an asp. . . .

If life had dealt otherwise with her, from this hand—

> Elixirs might escape;
> But now, compact as stone,
> My hand preserves a shape
> Too utterly its own.

The modifier "cerebral" has occurred at least twice; it is inevitable in describing much of her later work. "Sequence" is a story told with much of Robinson's clipped astuteness, although a trifle muddied in its over-restraint. It has beauty, but it is a cloudy mental beauty, too wraithlike to be wholly apprehended. After a fantastic portrait of her brain, she continues the self-portraiture:

> This for the mind, and for the little rest
> A hollow scooped to blackness in the breast.

This metaphor of black nothing as her heart indicates that the early bitterness is still hers. Another flash is even more starting and revealing; and indicates a contact with the human crowd which goes far toward explaining her hatred of it:

> I was, being human, born alone;
> I am, being woman, hard beset;
> I live by squeezing from a stone
> The little nourishment I get.

But there is a brave fighting quality which lets her be the player rather than the plaything of fate, as Adah Isaacs Menken was to the end:

> In masks outrageous and austere
> The years go by in single file;
> But none has merited my fear,
> And none has quite escaped my smile.

With clever violence she puts from her the cup of pity, in one of her most singing pieces:

> Pity the wolves who prowl unsleeping
> Guarding the pasture from a thief;
> Pity the proud leopards weeping
> Tears of subtle grief.

Pity the savage panther sheathing
Sharp disdain in silken gloves;
Pity the golden lions breathing
Fire upon their loves.

Pity the prickly star that frightens
The Christ Child with its shattered spear;
Pity the midnight when it lightens;
Pity me, my dear.

She names herself in this as a strong, wild, triumphant thing—some vast golden jungle cat, one golden star, the golden menace of the storm out of the mystery of midnight. Often her objective pieces have a persisting overtone of personal application. "Nebuchadnezzar" is one of these. What poetry is, and what it is not, can be well learned from a comparative study of her eight fine lines on this theme, and the meandering pages of Masters on the same subject. "The Good Birds," "Nonchalance," the gruesome astringency of "Fable," the homely chat "Castilian," "Little Sonnet"—these are all excellent. At times an over-intellectualized piece like "Benvenuto's Valentine" contains an arresting flash:

Nor Hamlet exquisite and thin
As moonbeams in an inky cape.

"Peregrine," the longest poem in the book, with its seductive near rhymes, ends well, with the recurrent overtone referred to:

The noose draws tighter;
This is the end;
I'm a good fighter,
But a bad friend:
I've played the traitor
Over and over;
I'm a good hater,
But a bad lover.

The last half dozen poems are unimportant. This is the more astonishing, when her magazine product contains such unincluded beauty as the sonnet to Beauty commencing—

> You are the faintest freckles on the hide
> Of fawns; the hoofprint stamped into the slope
> Of slithering glaciers by the antelope;
> The silk upon the mushroom's under side
> Constricts you.

—and the sharp picture, "Poor Earth." In place of these, we have little decorations, and Eliot-things like "Lilliputian." A world of these would be willingly spared for such magnificent singing as "Heroics":

> Though here and there a man is left
> Whose iron thread eludes the shears,
> The martyr with his bosom cleft
> Is dead these seven heavy years.
>
> Does he survive whose tongue was slit,
> To slake some envy of a king's?
> Sportive silver cried from it
> Before the savage cut the strings.
>
> The rack has crumpled up the limb
> Stretched immediate to fly;
> Never ask the end of him
> Stubborn to outstare the sky.
>
> Assuming an heroic mask,
> He stands a tall derisive tree,
> While servile to the speckled task
> We move devoted hand and knee.
>
> It is no virtue, but a fault
> Thus to breathe ignoble air,
> Suffering unclean assault
> And insult dubious to bear.

The mastery slips a trifle in the last stanza, with its tepid opening and its inverted conclusion; but the passion makes all pardoned. Here we have the martyrdom motif again, phrased more brilliantly than ever. It is more than a fancy that the eagle man, "stubborn to outstare the sky," whose cleft bosom and slit tongue mark the seven years' suffering, suddenly alters in the poem to a "tall derisive tree" ("And none has quite escaped my smile," of the years); it is more than likely that we know the end of him, as serf of the speckled task ("I've played the traitor Over and over.") This is a recapitulation of all the singing: the eagle and the mole again: the tortoise and the escaper again. As an objective poem, it is splendid, and suffices; but it adds to its interest to know that in it all the strands of the varied singing are tied together.

So young is Mrs. Wylie's singing, despite its polished excellence, that an analysis of the tendencies revealed may be of shaping potency. Each poet chooses his own path, to some extent:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less travelled by,
> And that has made all the difference.

The choice here is between the high song of the jeweled brain, and the sedulous aping of the Eliot influence. America will look with undivine indifference upon the decision, except for those sparse oases within it which mourn the flicker where was the flame, and guard the flame that persists. A poem like "Castilian" indicates the vistas of her vision, coupled with an ability to make the buried past speak as authentically as Browning's

Duke or the elder Gobbo. Many poems seize her own soul and sing its eerie history with surpassing ability. These on the one hand: but there are the others; they have increased of late. If "The Waste Land" is her Circe, there is little more to be said. But there was a flower called moly.

CHAPTER XVII

Rose O'Neill: A Sister of Campion

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, English lyric poetry sent up its first delicate shoots of native song:

> Blow, northern wind,
> Send thou me my sweeting.
>
> Sumer is i-comen in,
> Loud sing cuckoo;
> Groweth seed and bloweth mead,
> And springeth the wood new.
> Sing cuckoo!

It is, however, as Ernest Rhys has pointed out, in the Elizabethan song books that the lyric reached its perfection, a magic welding of words and music to quicken the pulse and kindle the thought by a sheer increase in the sensation of living. Thomas Campion was the most rounded and sustained of these lutanists:

> Shall I come, sweet Love, to thee
> When the evening beams are set?
> Shall I not excluded be?
> Will you find no feigned let?
> Let me not, for pity, more
> Tell the long hours at your door.

He could pass from the lovely wit of "Thou Art Not Fair" to verses as musically melancholy as:

> Follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow!
> Though thou be black as night,
> And she made all of light,
> Yet follow thy fair sun, unhappy shadow!

There was more unstudied charm in Herrick at times, a wider beauty in certain songs sprinkling the dramas of the day, indisputably loftier flight in the great romantics, deeper mystic insight in the possessed sanity of Blake; but none sang so truly and wholly as the author of:

> Now winter nights enlarge
> The number of their hours,
> And clouds do storms discharge
> Upon the airy towers.

or the more haunting cadence of:

> Where are all thy beauties now, all hearts enchaining?
> Whither are thy flatterers gone with all their feigning?
> All fled, and thou alone still here remaining.

Poe, in his better work, knew the shadowed side of this singing; Whitman flung himself against its heights on rare bright moments; Lanier winged heavily toward them. There are singers of one song in early and later America worthy of inclusion, for the one song's sake, in the lyric canon; Wheelock and Miss Millay reach its melody at times; but in Rose O'Neill alone of American singers is there a large flight not alien to Shakespeare's contemporary.

The poet was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, daughter of a quaint booklover from Ireland and a loved mother who is still living. The original intention was to make of the girl an actress; but she was too sensitive for public passion. She turned to art, and by fifteen, untaught, she had restored the family affluence by successful illustration. From Omaha, Nebraska, where the family had moved, she came on to New York, and for years was a leading illustrator for many publishers. Her chief commercial success was the Kewpies, with their fascinating drawings and light delicious rhymes. She married Harry Leon Wilson, the novelist, from whom she subsequently separated. During many years she lived at a retreat, Bonnybrook, in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri. At present, she divides her time among a studio on Washington Square, a villa at Capri, and hemlocked "Carabas" on the Saugatuck River near Westport, Connecticut. In addition to her illustrations are her fantastic serious drawings—fauns, satyrs, trollwomen, centaurs, vast primordial beings who once roamed young earth. Her studio is the permanent home of these sweet half-human monsters; her poetry is another home for them. In 1922 appeared her one collected volume of poems, *The Master Mistress.* This earns her an enduring place in American literature.

Her golden utterance merits a title from the most golden-tongued of all our poets:

> A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted
> Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion.

In her successful poems—and there are many of them—she has an inevitability of thought and melody, a blending of the two great ingredients of her art, which sets

her apart from current singing. She opens on an austere note:

I bring this weight of savage singing here,
  Fitting for you who feast upon fierce things,
Like to one running from a wood in fear
And triumph terrible, who strongly brings
  A bright beast held beneath his rended breast.
    Hilarious distress
Of Spartan folly fainting with its prize,
  Of tearing trophy, burning boon and glee!
    But, oh, arise,
  And get me from my fanged captive free!
Oh, come, oh quickly lift the cloak, and see
  Him gleaming, ere too deep he diggeth me.

It is hardly apt to say that this volume established her as a leading American poet of today. She is as American and as much of today as the wind, and no more. Like Poe before her, she is above accidents of village and date—a savage melodist, whose best score of poems hold such beauty and strength that they push outward the bourn of English singing. Not of her mental skill nor her teaching does this singing come: half of her body is in the earth—the pagan Celtic earth; up through it tremble the sweet dark whispers that once made faun and gnome and slant-eyed Pan and uncouth earth-shaking Titan.

The Sonnet begs me like a bridegroom,
    "Come within."
"This palace! Not for me, the desert-born!"
I turn me, as from some too lordly sin,
  And like a singing Hagar, pause and pass—
To lift for night's sweet thieves my houseless horn
  In broken rhythms of the windy grass.
I will not be the measure-pacing bride,
  But where the flutes come faintly,
    Sing outside,

Insensate to her own bright music, open-eyed to its origin, she says elsewhere:

> But, when the gray sea of my silence moves,
> The wounded waves with sluggish rolling part
> To let out some dis-fathomed monster's head
> With blind and streaming eyes; So from this bed,
> Heaves up my heavy art.

In an early poem she pictures herself:

> —woman turned to be a fay.
> And see, on every flower a pearl appears
> Where fell, in dancing, all my little tears.

"Here I have my delight," she says, "where Horn-foot dances." She is armed against a cool welcome:

> Blow and beat upon my hut,
> Wind of man's disdain!

Few poets ever deserved it less. Often at her best she is mad: a lucid overwit as inspired as Blake's:

> The wind was full of withered leaves,
> The golden and the red;
> They cried to one who hid his eyes,
> "Follow the flying dead.
>
> "Come loose your soul from off the bough
> Where it doth hang and sigh,
> And give it to the long-maned wind
> And see your dead soul fly.
>
> "And loose your heart from off the stem
> Where it doth pulse and pale,
> And on the sea of running air
> Let your dead heart sail.

"For only the dead are travellers,"
The wild leaves sang and said.
"Follow, follow, follow,
Follow the flying dead!"

She stands at times within that place of savage enchantment sung in Kubla Khan.

There are too many faces
In the darkling places;
Where the wet roots glisten
Too many lean and listen,
And the wind along the leaves has made me mad.

Among her most magnificent poems are those written in a mistaken anticipation of that blindness that brightened the vision of Milton and Homer:

Oh, come, my darkness!
There has been too much of light,
Too much of heaping noon.
Give me the empty night!
And let there be
No ministration of the moon,
Nor gold along the sea.

Let no leaf
Turn argent, and no tree
Be quickened into silver grief:
Fold up the arduous bright;
Beat down and still
The howling of the kennelled will
And hungry hounds of sight!
Oh come my darkness!

The golden swell of such poetry, the reined wonder of the music, is, to revive a wilted word, inimitable. In

her longer flights she is as sure, as "The Eagle Hunter" attests:

I said: I will go down,
  Save me from hurts of height,
  Wounds of renown,
The spurning spears of light
And scorn of the gigantic flight.
  I will desist,
Give up the great antagonist;
  I will go hence
From this most dire magnificence
  And regal state
Of battle desperate;
  Resign
The hunt of eagles to the fine
And fierce essay, the dare-and-do
Of taller men and new.
  I will restore
Me to the valley's eye and noon,
And crack my heart no more,
But hide, in poor delight
  Of harmless things,
From haunt of height
And windy width of wings.

Let fly the towering prey,
Unwieldy as the moon!
I will go down and stay,
Be succoured by disgrace,
Too mean for high mishap.
Be safe and low my chase,
No Titan in my trap
With conquered terror's mighty eye,
  And that great sigh
That makes the hunter pale!

Ah, let no sun-insulting sail
Of pinions tempt me now
  From my low vow,
Nor giant shapes go by
Between me and the sky!

"Hunters of Heaven" and "The Returned" are magnificent in kindred mood. "The High House" is her own Tower of Babel:

> And houses that hob-nob the sky
> Turn from the tallest men.

Her love poems often catch a sheer lyric sanity. Such a true song as "Established" shows this at its best:

> I made a house of houselessness,
> A garden of your going:
> And seven trees of seven wounds
> You gave me, all unknowing:
> I made a feast of golden grief
> That you so lordly left me,
> I made a bed of all the smiles
> Whereof your lip bereft me:
> I made a sun of your delay,
> Your daily loss, his setting:
> I made a wall of all your words
> And a lock of your forgetting.

"Sale" is as memorable; the tabulation of enduring poems would reach two score titles.

The purest Elizabethan singing is in "As I Went By" and similar songs:

> As I went by,
> An old man with a curded eye
> Said: "Much as you can laugh and kiss,
> You will be like this."
> And I did not believe him,
> But made haste to leave him,
> Laughing all the way.
> Yet, another day,
> He made the self-same say,

For my laughter grieved him.
And I believed him!
Then I shook
Like a willow in a brook,
Like the ox from the goad,
Like the slave beneath the load,
Like the reed under rain,
And the sick man in pain,
And the hind before the hound,
And the new corpse in the ground!

This is found too in "Poet to Poet," and in the whimsical "The Fairy Husband." She is not defeated by life:

Now that I am lame,
Now the fierce is tame,
Now the mane is shorn,
And the banner torn,
I bring thee, lord,
The shattered sword.
Take the tattered fool,
Take the broken tool,
Take the last offense,
This ruined insolence!

After a stretch of many less worthy pages, we suddenly encounter a slender song as magical as de la Mare's soft elegy:

And few there are who live, alas,
And they are far from here,
Who know how young and dear I was
When I was young and dear.

She is not objective as often; yet she succeeds as well in this mood as in the other. Several of her folksongs, as "Irish Song" and "Forgotten Patrick," are in un-

rhymed verse as melodious as if the terminal tinkle were present; they have the ready tear and the quick laughter bubbling just under the surface that is a hazel wand for much Celtic poetry. These and "The Betrayed," described as "Poor cradle-song," have a rich human undertone that is pole distant from poems distilled from other poems. Here is the charming lullaby:

Fooled one, fooled one,
  Hush your little grieving;
Because you were so little
  We fooled you into living.
Because you were so little,
  We gave you to the tear,
But your father and your mother
  Were so young last year.

Fooled one, fooled one,
  I never thought to tell you
What a fix the world is
  And how they buy and sell you.
You should have a golden cradle,
  You should have a silver stool,
But when your little words come,
  Don't let the words be crool.

Fooled one, fooled one,
  When my dove is sleeping,
I'm playing that you *don't know*
  Till cruel dawn is creeping;
Like a safe little dream-babe,
  That neither sees nor hears.
But oh, *it is your looking,*
  With your little wild tears!

Some day, some day,
  In scarlet coat and breeches
You'll be chasing foxes
  With your fine hound bitches;

And sporting velvet ladies
To the King of Ireland's ball,
And if you see me by the road,
You needn't look at all.

Here the first three stanzas have a homely imperfection of technique that adds to their genuine appeal; the sudden fanfare of day-dream pride moves from the rich hunting chromo into the joyful "sporting velvet ladies" to the most madly appropriate of all places, the farthest day-dream of all. Then with a sudden flash the velvet cavalcade flings its dust upon the stooped old mother by the roadside: and she who made the scene ties the pathos together with the last crooning line.

The twenty songs already mentioned would entitle her to high ranking; there are as many more as permanent, with unforgettable beauties. It is difficult to quote isolated bits, as in almost every case it is the totality of the singing which impresses; the songs are not stiff trellises strung with purple quotations. These are some fragments which may be offered: Of Agamemnon, who—

With iron breast held down that haunted heart.

Of a fairy child:

When she put it into bed,
The bed began to pray,
For fear that such a golden head
Might fade before the day.

Of the owl:

Eater of shadows! Ghoul and gullet of the wind!

And these lines:

> Fulfilment of defeat to crown your head,
> And all your perfect follies in your face.

> Now that I love you, love, no more,
> You hang upon my mind.

> You are he whom the beaks defile,
> You are faint from the walls you broke.

> The swain that vowed him to despairs
> Now rosily recants.

Among poems less worthy as a whole is much beauty that we would not willingly omit:

> A heavenly fool that kept the flutes of heaven.

> Nor climb for curious wonder any hill.

> I will arise and go before the day
> Has beggared princely night.

At her height, she is matched in sheer lyric utterance by none of our other poets, for any length of singing. It must always be remembered that even in her height singing her field is limited. She is always close to the ghoul-haunted woodland; she has not left its shadow far enough behind to acquire for her singing any rounded vision of life. Her sweet monsters and the poet herself are her chief themes. Be it her blame that she has not followed the tinkling wethers of popular theme and taste, and given us a threnody on the death of the first Mrs. Wilson, an ode on the opening of the Panama Canal or the closing of the Versailles confluence, a ragtime

rhapsody on a Wilkes-Barre Honky-Tonk, a jazz dirge for a red bartender. She is master-mistress of one wild field: songs of the fay heart and the bright love.

This is when she is at her height: but she is by no means a bide-at-home here. The poems did not have magazine delivery, although long before their volume appearance this treasure-trove had been known to certain current singers, who wear a faint accolade echoing her glory. This umbrella from the July sun of immediate criticism has kept her out of the tide of modern poetical thinking. If she had been more in the co-operative workshop, some of the butterfly dust might have been brushed off; but we would also have lost what we could not choose to keep, lines as dead or otherwise faulty as:

> And heels of a dance adept.
>
> With thine ensanguined eyes—
> With lethal looks and long.

Not to dwell upon this odd patois:

> But now
> How
> You *enjambez* the edge of the earth. . . .
> No, you lounge in, *flaneur;*
> An effect of lucent *loisir.*

We enthusiastically favor this or any poet's writing what they please: but, to alter the prayer of H. D., spare us from such ugliness!

Ernest Rhys holds that "unless there is a concurrence between the contemporary idiom of the lyrist, half the expressional force of his ideas will be lost." There was the clergyman touring the Holy Land, embarked on a

slight boat on the Sea of Galilee, who had gently hectored the boatman: "If you do not know Latin, one quarter of your life is gone; if you are ignorant of Greek, half of your life is gone; if you never studied Hebrew, three fourths of your life are gone." Then came a storm; and the boatman, on learning that his passenger could not swim, uttered with finality, "Well, if you never learned how to swim, all of your life is gone." We may remind the critic that, if the author cannot plumb to the deep wells of authentic poetry, all the expressional force of his ideas will be lost. His attitude, of course, is sound, if it is not allowed to grow into utter rigidity. The practice of verse-writers who conceive that a pre-Keatsian speech of itself makes poetry, is doomed to lyric bankruptcy. But Miss O'Neill by no means sanctifies her lapses from today's speech. Many of her finest poems are free from enmummied words; and when she uses them, it is as a vehicle to hymn a pulsating emotion, never as a substitute for the feeling. If her usage here is no crown, at least it is less crime than pardonable misdemeanor.

Her poetry will lose a certain Puritan following, because of her cryptic frankness on the theme of love. She does not write this across the sky; neither does she, as is the convention, make this creep into a hole and draw the hole in after it. It is here, in a few poems; those who are not offended by this note in the masters since the Greeks, will not be offended by it here.

Most serious of her failings is a lack of discrimination, which includes with the poems referred to the sagging Norway series, the frequent unimpressive poems to certain individuals, verses of the riddling unintelligibility of "Manuel's Beds," the bulk of the war singing, and other arid spots. This is her first volume, and may re-

main her only one; there is a palliation here in that a too strict censoring of this, to suit even her own taste, might have excluded some of the better poems. Perhaps the whole represents her own taste: in which event she suffers from a walking case of that undiscrimination which makes Lindsay so amusing and at times incredible, and which reminds of the homely worth of editing. The collected poems of Poe, Whitman, Lanier, and many other important singers, have the same moon-faced ruggedness, of silver peak, dull valley, and black crevasse: there is something petty in the poet who keeps awake all the time. Shelley stumbles, and Housman keeps his feet; but Shelley stumbled from Heaven, and Housman walked in Shropshire. The Rotary Clubs and Chambers of Commerce have not yet seen to it that Miss O'Neill has been honored by an impressed legislature with the laureateship of one of our cultured commonwealths; but she suffers from no winter of discontent at this loud and appropriate silence. Let her day be sternly deferred until her country has affectionately absorbed her: Campion was forgotten for two and a half centuries. The singing is here, and will not suffer as the years shrug by.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Waste Land

The seeds of modern poetry that fell into good ground have come to rich fruitage. But all the human soil was not so worthy. Some of the seeds fell by the magazine wayside, and the editor fowls came and devoured them up. Some fell upon the stony places: lack of encouragement, the harsh tread of the insensitive world; and they withered away. And some fell among thorns: among grotesque mental traits, perverted attitudes, diseased personalities; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them. In a flash of phrase-making, Theodore Roosevelt spoke of the "insane fringe" of any anti-conventional movement. This expression pictures the end of a series of gradations; and American poetry has all of them. Even this mad end has its well-oiled machinery of adulation; it is no shrinking violet of a group. Compose your steps for the long downward way. There is good precedent for the descent into hell, if we have strength enough to rise again from the dead land.

There are two traits which enduring poetry must not omit. The first of these is, that it must sing. The poet who serves us verse without an acceptable line-music at best achieves a vegetable steak, which to its last bloodless crumb is no steak. The second of these is, that it must interest. This is the lowest statement of its appeal to the emotions; unless it hold interest, it cannot quicken the

pulse and kindle the thought, and achieve an increase in the very sensation of life which is its function. The poet whose lines lack interest is a Scheherezade, who does not need the axe of Sultan Time to accomplish her death: she is already dead, and interred in the justifiable apathy of a public none too sensitive to the greatest singing.

The technical and thematic liberation of Walt Whitman arrived at last in Brookline via Paris and London. Miss Lowell rode forth against the conservatives' town of Orleans (she is always engaged in a futile siege of some city), accoutered in a glittering cadenced mail; after her tumbled a goodly company clothed in the resounding platitudes of the Imagists' Manifesto—*videlicet,* an attire woven off:

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the exact word.
2. To create new rhythms.
3. To allow absolute freedom in the choice of a subject, with her Puritanic gloss, "within the bounds of good taste."
4. To present an image.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear.
6. To concentrate: "concentration is of the essence of poetry."

The Imagists further stated, "these principles are not new. . . . They are the essentials of all great poetry, indeed of all great literature"—forgetting for the moment that the last two referred specifically to poetry. There is nothing startling in any of these: they are true, with many limitations. They omit certain immanent ingredients of poetry; they lay the emphasis upon technique rather than emotional appeal. Their technique, such as

it is, is about all that the Imagists have to offer. These "rules" cry aloud for addenda and amendments, including:

7. To use only poetic rhythms, or rhythms tending toward unity rather than variety.
8. To interest always.
9. To remain sane: never to substitute nonsense for sanity or ecstasy.

In fact, all of these could have been replaced by a simple and usually forgotten requirement:

To produce poetry.

Hilda Doolittle (H. D.), an expatriated American, is regarded by many as the chief of these poets One of her most praised pieces is "Oread":

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.

The mind, as it cleaves through life, throws images to the side as a prow tosses spray. Many of the images are fully as evanescent. There is a momentary resemblance between green waves and green trees: yet, after all, waves are not pointed pines, nor pools of fir. The man who sees them once so is fortunate; the man who sees them twice so is forgiven. But the man who sees them three times in this false guise is on the edge of seeing them always so: he may seek to hew a Christmas tree

from the spray, or bruise his diving head against the gnarled forest. The verb *splash* sprains its muscles, when applied to pines. The image is remote and, as images go, mediocre: the complete poem is a shaped dilution of no more than this. It sings, and sings well in a thin high woman's voice: but its word is unimportant. Miss Lowell, chief publicity agent for the Imagists, says of this author's work: "This is a narrow art, it has no scope, it neither digs deeply nor spreads widely." This delimitation is true; and poetry that does none of these things remains minor, a low-flight singing, less niched in the warm heart of the people, than noted by the chill appraisal of the aloof book-dweller.

John Gould Fletcher is the second of her examples of the movement. The common judgment upon his work—and a true one—is that it does not interest. It is a splatter of words, as in this lauded picture of clouds:

Whirlpools of purple and gold,
Winds from the mountains of cinnebar,
Lacquered mandarin moments, palanquins swaying and balancing,
Amid the vermilion pavilions, against the jade balustrades,
Glint of the glittering wings of dragon-flies in the light;
Silver filaments, golden flakes settling downwards,
Rippling, quivering flutters, repulse and surrender,
The sun broidered upon the rain,
The rain rustling with the sun.

These last two lines, says Miss Lowell, "might serve as an epitome of the poet's work. It is lyric truth in its highest form." Recall the first Imagist platitude: "to use the language of common speech"; and then consider *broidered, lacquered mandarin moments,* and the rest. Consider the meaning of the last two lines. The last

line is the reverse of "hard and clear," and is intelligible only by a strained construction. It is not lyric truth in any form; it is mediocre verbal broidery. Fletcher remains an uninteresting, neutral versifier: at times mildly effective; oftener words, idle words.

Conrad Aiken is out of the current of the Imagists; but he suffers from the faults into which they depress. After the bright imitative clarity of his "Earth Triumphant," he passed at last into something wholly original, as verse goes—a verse saturated with exquisite music, rarely interesting, and heaving above a steady undertow explicable only in the light of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. At his best, he can write music with this exquisite opening:

> Music I heard with you was more than music,
> And bread I broke with you was more than bread.
> Now that I am without you, all is desolate,
> All that was once so beautiful is dead.

This is a rare note, in pages marred by dusty erudition:

> What archimage
> So roiled the dark?

and by an apathetic mesalliance with remote sex soilure:

> "Now here's a little blue-eyed girl in Virgo,
> Loved by a syphilitic, twice her age."
> Among the ghostly stars a whisper died.

Admirers of this verse hold that the tired music of the third line is justification for the whole. The story of Senlin, even more than the story of Forslin, gems a meaningless mumble of interrogations with bright strains

of poetry, images that at times triumphantly override sanity:

> Immense and solitary in a desert of rocks
> Behold a bewildered oak
> With white clouds screaming through its leafy brain!

In haunting passages white unicorns come in the lilac dusk to drink: lovely gibble-gabble, exquisite mental mish-mash. The poem is magic and mush, harassed with bloated fleshliness. "The Charnel Rose" wilts intentionally through the gamut of sexual perversions. Maitland said brusquely of Rossetti that that fleshly poet insisted upon baring his roseate bosom in his verses, in weary, wasting, yet exquisitely morbid sensuality; something of this speaks throughout the later work of Aiken. There is nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane.

The Imagists led directly into the "Others" group; but in the meantime there were neighboring depressions. Gertrude Stein's bizarre prose jabber, "Tender Buttons," preceded even Ezra Pound; at a later date came Alfred Kreymborg. In the interval, an early fruit of the Stein song was the verse of Donald Evans and Allen Norton. The former was a poet twisted; the latter was a lesser Donald Evans. In Evans' "Sonnets from the Patagonian" we get the worst side of him (there is never an undiluted best side):

> He cradles sin, and with a figleaf fan
> Taps his green cat, watching the round suns span
> The wasted minutes to eternity.
>
> His calm moustache points to the ironies,
> And a fawn-colored laugh sucks in the night.

And when she bent to kiss her crumpled heart,
It lit a Chinese candle in his head.

Her hidden smile was full of little breasts,
And with her too-white hands she stroked her fears—

the opening of a sonnet ending on the glorious folderol:

She triumphed in the tragic turnip field.

Is it a fancy, or do we see the mole incarnation of Elinor Wylie timidly listening to this, and Maxwell Bodenheim greedily drinking in the song? Norton wings a trifle below this precious foolishness:

But in the cradling courtship of your voice
I can forget the falling out of hair.

I am no feather, but my mind is milk.

The vegetables sit themselves at ease,
Thinking themselves quite worthy of God's lap,
And making armchairs of moralities.

Another lonely offshoot of the same cult is Benjamin de Casseres. It may be chronicled for future delectation that no one of these poets has lacked a coterie of otherwise intelligent voices, which has hailed him as the leading serious poet of America. De Casseres, wrote Blanche Shoemaker Wagstaff in *The Poetry Journal,* is "the super-man fired with Nietzschean verbosity. . . . His poems are metaphysical meteors, searching, cataclysmic, and rich in satire." The same critic has elsewhere quoted from "Aristotle in the original Latin." A typical satiric meteor is this modest autobiographical note:

I am the Watcher, and me nothing eludes.
I live behind the mask of things,
My breath is world-wither. . . .
I crouch in my being, implacable, receptive, the ears of my soul in rigid prick,
Catching whiffs of the Verities.

Ears in rigid prick, catching whiffs, is the most gymnastic figure in modern poetry. Later on he is the visible Invisible, the eel that slips through God's hands, a dominoed Abstraction, guessing at himself unegged; he sheds universes and moults cycles—we have his word for it. He may remain unegged, but he earns inclusion here.

Ezra Pound was the *comadre* who brought Imagism to birth. He is a distinguished poet, a master technician, and some ninety-nine per cent of his product is vapid foolishness. He acknowledges Whitman as the "pig-headed" father of his singing; he has done what Amy Lowell has vainly attempted, make exquisite music of the trifle, usually erotic:

The faint odor of your patchouli,
Faint, almost, as the lines of cruelty about your chin,
Assails me, and concerns me almost as little.

Here is a typical opening:

Will people accept them?
(i.e. these songs).
As a timorous wench from a centaur
(or a centurion),
Already they flee, howling in terror.

Centaur . . . centurion, versimilitudes . . . virgin in this poem, begin to touch that echolalia, a symptom of mental decay, pointed out in other poets by Max Nordau.

He rejects the mediocre for "smiles full of teeth and . . . ungainly laughter"; and while there is a stalwart acidity to his attitudinizing, he is content to stoop to maundering like "Three Cantos," and to lyrics of the type of "Papyrus":

Spring. . . .
Too long. . . .
Gongula. . . .

This flicker phase of his work was the inspiration for Alfred Kreymborg, who founded "Others" in 1915, and edited its three anthologies. He is the author of "Mushrooms" and "Blood of Things." He and several of his shapeless followers possess a cleverness far slighter than Pound's, and a whimsical eccentricity. They move in mutual adulation and some general appreciation. But the appreciation went to the cleverness and the rare July bolts of poetry: the eccentricity was forgiven; while the versifiers apparently have interpreted the eccentricity as the admired be-all and end-all, have shrined it in the inner sanctorium, and worship their deviation, ignoring the wasting flame. This is an idea—Kreymborg's "Variation":

Till you came—
I was I.

It is rooted in an emotion; but the poetic treatment is not here. "Overheard in an Asylum" is typical:

Baby, rest.
The war is over.
Only pigs
Slop over so.

He delights in jigging on in this impromptu fashion:

> We have a one-room home.
> You have a two-room, three-room, four-room.
> We have a one-room home
> Because a one-room home is all we have.
> We have a one-room home
> Because a one-room home holds all we have.
> We have a one-room home
> because we do not want
> a two-room, three-room, four-room.

"I am four monkeys," he confesses engagingly; "how many monkeys are you?" "In my mind, such as it is," he blueprints, "bassoons hobnob with pelicans." "Old Manuscript" indicates the thin gold he sometimes nears:

> The sky
> is that beautiful old parchment
> in which the sun
> and the moon
> keep their diary.

There is a pleasant whimsey here, an overtone of poetry; but the eccentricity receives all the emphasis. The second volume accentuates the failing. There is a virtue in clowning; and if it be recognized for what it is, there is no harm done, and the flour-face is entitled to our laughter and gratitude.

Maxwell Bodenheim is an early disciple of Kreymborg; even more than the other he is hailed by many as a significant poet. He possesses an acrid brain, with a strong tendency to writhe into acrobatic nonsense, and an abiding veneration of his own differentness. *Minna and Myself,* his first book, contained an introduction by a "jaundiced" critic; his judgment was that at times,

drunken with his own distillation, Bodenheim reeled between preciosity and incoherence. He is praised for his verbal nuances; but verbal nuances, without emotion and without word music, are not poetry. The book opens:

> Twilight pushed down your eyes
> With shimmering, pregnant fingers,
> That leave you covered with still-born touch.
> With little whips of dead words
> Silence cuts your lips to a keener red.
> Your heart strikes its bed of dark mirth, in death,
> And your hands lie over it, guarding the corpse.

There is thinking of a sort here; but it is an affected strain to refer to the "shimmering, pregnant fingers" of twilight, which leaves a woman "covered with still-born touch." It is unimportant and uninteresting; the musical framework opens with a faint unified pattern, which desiccates into prose in the conclusion. The second verses are worse:

> Your cheeks are spent diminuendos
> Sheering the rose-veiled silence of your lips.
> Your eyes are gossamer coquettes
> Ringed with the sparkling breath of dead loves.
> Your body strays into lanterns of form
> Strewing the night within this room.

Every line shows the agony of doing something different: of filling the poetic English landscape with an adjective from Tahiti coupled to a noun from Madagascar and a verb from Helsingfors; and so it goes on in stumbling unpoeticisms:

> Your criss-crossed ringlets of hair
> Are tipped with faltering opalescence.

Your limbs release fleeing andantes of pain.

Trees probing the shrilly sensitive sunset
Like little, laced nightmares leaning
Upon a scarlet breast.

We learn of rubies of sound, dahlia murmurs, "a mood whose heart was a flagon of ashes." The divine Crashaw, a magnificent poet at times, enlivened seventeenth-century singing with the same affected strain, as in the apostrophe to Magdalen's eyes ending:

He's followed by two faithful fountains,
Two walking baths, two weeping motions,
Portable, and compendious oceans.

Whether in the chopped stutter of Bodenheim's lines or the easier flow of Crashaw's, this distended exaggeration is not poetry.

Advice, a second volume, contains this seductive auctorial admission, after listing the periodicals in which the verses had appeared: "They are good, in spite of their numerous appearances." The same strain hobbles on:

The smirched geometries of this stern place.

His eyes are muddy capitulations.

The air was like an old priest
Disrobing without embarrassment.

Stars . . . icily clustered nuts
Dotting trees of solitude.

To him, the sky seemed an angelic
Pasture stripped to phantom tranquillity.

In a later poem, he has a visitor from Mars say to an Earthling, "Novelty to you is almost crime." Novelty like all of this is. Bodenheim has a mental equipment which might produce poetry; but he deliberately takes the clay of his mind, shapes a nightmare gargoyle, and depresses its leering features with eccentric pushes into the likeness of nothing in the heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the sane fantasies under consciousness. This is not and cannot be poetry. At times it is sharp epigrammatic prose; oftener it is nothing more than a misused and tortured vocabulary.

If Bodenheim fails, there are "Others" much further along the same road. The three collected anthologies of the school bristle with distinctive things like Walter Conrad Arensberg's "Ing":

Ing? Is it possible to mean ing?
Suppose
for the termination in *g*
a disoriented
series
of the simple fractures
in sleep
Soporific
has accordingly a value for soap
so present to
sew pieces.
And *p* says: peace is.

This is echolalia: soporific, soap, so present, sew pieces, peace is—words connected in sound and not meaning; it is a mental abberation. He is differently unique in:

INTERFERE IN ORDER TO MORrow was once
upon a timePIECE OF MY MInd you do not

This conclusion is kin to Mina Loy's opening of a "Love Song":

Spawn of fantasies
Sitting the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
"Once upon a time"
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous membrane

Marianne Moore shows her own uniquity in "My Apish Cousins":

Winked too much and were afraid of snakes. The zebras,
supreme in
Their abnormality; the elephants with their fog-colored skin
And strictly practical appendages
Were there, the small cats and the parrakeet,
Trivial and humdrum on examination, destroying
Bark and portions of the food it could not eat.

Here we have prose set up in metric lines—an eccentric climax of the "Others" art. The "fog-colored skin" of the elephants is admirable; the totality is less than nothing. Robert Carlton Brown, Skipwith Cannell, Alice Groff, the lesser Orrick Johns, William Carlos Williams, a clever eccentric, Adolf Wolff, Wallace Stevens, who like Kreymborg shows flashes of poetic ability, but can write

A man and a woman
Are one
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one

—these are other remarkable members of the group. Later comes Matthew Josephson's "Galimathias," moving from the fleshly to

> therefore threefour
> one for that two
> for that she was two
> for that she was true
> although yet wherefour the of
> whereof?

—and E. E. Cummings, with the maddest nonsense of all, as in these lines which can hardly be read too rapidly:

> a: crimbflitteringish is arefloatsis ing-
> fallall! mil, shy milbrightlions
> my (hurl flicker handful
> in) dodging are shybrigHteyes is crum bs (lll) if, ey Es

and this portrait of a pianist:

> ta
> ppin
> g
> toe
>
> hip
> popot
> amus Back
>
> gen
> teel-ly
> lugu-
> bri ous
>
> eyes
> LOOPTHELOOP
>
> as
>
> fathandsbangrag

This has been interpreted by the "We Boys" of criticism like the Latin interpretation of Mr. Pickwick's stone; an unneeded perversion. Cummings' *Tulips and Chimneys* reveals an authentic poet who has eaten the loco-weed miscalled modernism. Consider this stanza from "Epithalamion":

> And still the mad magnificent herald Spring
> Assembles beauty from forgetfulness
> With the wild trump of April; witchery
> Of sound and odour drives the wingless thing,
> Man, forth into bright air; for now the red
> Leaps in the maple's cheek, and suddenly
> By shining hordes in sweet unserious dress
> Ascends the golden crocus from the dead.

"E. E. Cummings is easily first among the younger modern writers of poetry. His work is touched with genius. There is no line in these poems that is not genuinely alive," confesses his publisher. Here are six of the lines:

> fin
> -i-
> tes-
> i
> -mal-
> ly devours

Robert L. Wolf, in an untitled sonnet, sums up better than prose can the case:

> Goliath beat his breast and curled his beard,
> Disguised his egotism with small i's,
> Wrote free verse for the *Broom,* so I have heard,
> Press-agented himself in every wise.

One hairy ear cupped in a hairy paw
Alert for every veer or passing whim. . . .
Goliath painted blue his lower jaw—
It made the editors stare after him.

Colossally he strode, while critics gaped;
Reluctant artists hurried home, revised
Their outworn methods, imitated, aped.
Goliathisms everywhere were prized!
But David, unsophisticated youth,
Sat polishing a rounded pebble smooth.

Let Wolf disclaim the application if he will; let all the tea-room professors of bedlam literature discover immortal poetry in the gallimaufry of word-fragments. Cummings, Bodenheim, Kreymborg, have received votes from established critics as entitled to rank among the five outstanding American literary figures of the last five years. Here is the evidence. The indictment goes no more against them than against the persons in the rôles of critics who praise or tolerate this as poetry.

As long as the leading figures were no greater than these last mentioned, there was no adequate luminary worthy of the supreme obeisance. There was need for a major prophet for these poetic Ishmaelites: and he came—two of him at once. From across the water two mighty forms reared their mastodonic heads, out of the farrago of muck and mush; and *Ulysses* and "The Waste Land" were upon us. James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a mammoth record of a brainy artist's brain wanderings. Here is a typical passage:

. . . On. Know what I mean. No, change that ee.
Accept my poor little pres enclos. Ask her no
answ. Hold on. Five Dig. Two about here.
Penny the gulls. Elijah is com. Seven Davy Byrne's.

is eight about. Say half a crown. My poor
little pres. p.o.two and six. Write me a long.
Do you despise? Jingle have you the? So excited.

The last statement is indisputable. But it need not excite the reader. T. S. Eliot had written sharp verses before "The Waste Land," in this loose manner:

My house is a decayed house,
And the jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.
The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;
Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds,
The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,
Sneezes at evening, pokes the peevish gutter.

Here we have Bodenheim's master, great where the unexpatriated is small. Eliot is clever reading, frankly nasty, in a more virile amorousness than Aiken's. Here is a milder bit of one of his love-scenes:

Tests the razor on his leg
  Waiting until the shriek subsides.
The epileptic on the bed
  Curves backward, clutching at her sides.

"The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" is his best known early work, a clever bit of sophisticated verse containing lines like:

The evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table.

This is deservedly a favorite, as Bodenheim can hardly be, for its jolly fun:

Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?

and this amazing flash of truth: "It is impossible to say just what I mean." One of his lovely lines is, "He laughed like an irresponsible foetus." This is not an inept description of the whole movement.

But all this was minor to the major rhapsody of "The Waste Land." The thing is brilliantly named. "It is, perhaps, the finest poem in this generation," writes the literary editor of the New York *Tribune*. Others elide the perhaps. A saner group of critics hold, with reason, that it is not poetry at all (except for the fantastic interpretation below); that it is a vast hoax, conscious or unconscious; that, in detail and totality, it is erudite gibberish. If there is a rare swamp-gleam of poetry in it, Eliot explains in his Notes the poet from whom he lifted it bodily. It has no consecutivity, opening with this limping music:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

Four lines later, the author digresses into a scene on the Starnbergsee. Five lines further on, an unrelated childhood anecdote is given Six lines more, and we have a new digression. Here is typical music:

"You know nothing? Do you see nothing?
Do you remember
Nothing?
I remember
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

Queer how often a variant of this idea worries these singers! He continues:

> O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
> It's so elegant
> So intelligent.

Here is a passage praised for its "ineffably sweet conclusion":

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME
Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.
Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.
Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

The last two words might be rendered as good American slang, thereby improving the music. Here is the most memorable lyric outburst in the whole:

> The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
> Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
> O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
> And on her daughter
> They wash their feet in soda water
> *Et O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!*
>
> Twit twit twit
> Jug jug jug ug jug jug
> So rudely forc'd.
> Tereu

A second American edition let the third line from the last consist of half a dozen jugs, which gave the proper scarcity value to the first edition. Here is the conclusion

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam ceu chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

In the last seven lines are five languages, including two species of English—with more foreign words than English. And this is supposedly poetry in English. The erudite Notes are as amusing as anything in the book: "In the first part of Part V three themes are employed: the journey to Emmaus, the approach to the Chapel Perilous (see Miss Weston's book), and the present decay of eastern Europe." The themes are no more these than they are the landing on Ararat, the recipe for gin rickeys (see any Bartender's Guide) and the present price of 50–60 prunes. Some burst of sanity or honesty may exact a confession from the author and some of his defenders that the thing was an intended hoax. But it may not have been. There was the deferential man who showed the visitor around the Keokuk Asylum, and indicated especially the man who had the delusion that he was Queen Elizabeth's second husband. "Of course he's not," he explained with kindly condescension. "But how do you know?" "Why, because I am!" Nothing can alter the innate brainlessness of "The Waste Land."

And yet, we have the words in its favor. Can anything be said in behalf of all this errant verse, which is advocated so bitterly by some persons of critical standing? The utmost of their claims can be resolved into the following. First, it is set up that all of this, Aiken,

Fletcher, Kreymborg, Bodenheim, clear down to Eliot, is great poetry, because it is great music. The meaning, it is explained, is subordinated or eliminated; the music is deathless, and such as the poetry of today and tomorrow is entitled to show. . . . A: crimbflitteringish. . . . They wash their feet in soda water. . . . How many monkeys are you? . . . Tested for pure word music, Aiken qualifies as a poet; but few of the others achieve anything here. It is an odd conception of poetry, that meaning can be largely eliminated. Richard Aldington recently placed intelligibility as the chief requirement of poetry—he is kin to this group; Lowes states dogmatically:

> Expression in art can no more escape the demands of *intelligibility*, than expression in every-day speech. The poet writes in order to communicate, and to communicate he, too, must be understood.

Furthermore, meaning, such as it is, is the chief asset of Bodenheim and much of Kreymborg. The idea, expanded a trifle, is as if these melodious or cacophonic verses were poetry composed in English by a foreigner who could pronounce the language, but had no idea of the meaning of the words. An Italian once picked "cellar door" as the most beautiful combination of words in English. It is only needful to recall the music wedded to meaning of Shakespeare, Shelley, and their resounding compeers, to throw this explanatory defense out of court. The sound alone will not constitute this poetry.

There is a second line of defense, consisting of no less than the modest claim that a second cycle of literature is upon us. The first cycle of man's spoken and written word, from far before Homer to the present, is

ended at this moment; and at this exact moment the second cycle commences. The first was marked by intelligence, as well as music; the second says nothing to intelligence, as formerly understood. It speaks either to a new intelligence, sealed completely from the average man, and open only to these poets and critics and to the future; or it speaks to an intuition so sealed and so open. Let us grant these wild hypotheses for the moment: if the first, the sane, cycle is over, except for fading vestiges like Robinson, Frost, Masefield, Chesterton, Wheelock, Miss O'Neill, de la Mare, Hodgson, Sandburg, Lindsay, Abercrombie, Hardy, Miss Millay, Mrs. Wylie, Housman, Miss Wickham, and the rest of them; if the old sanity is to have no part henceforth, and a new hyperdimensional intelligence or intuition has come in simultaneously with these poets; if they sense it; if they can practice its art; then this follows: that only from the new standpoint may they be weighed. Our ears may be closed to a Shakespeare-Kreymborg, a Dante-Bodenheim, a Vergil-Aiken, a Homer-Eliot: such they may actually be, if fairly, and only, by this new artistic evaluation are they judged.

But not by us, the sane. To us their work is no more than any bedlam raving. When persons, otherwise sane, take it seriously, in praise or anthology, they are false to all the intelligence, all the beauty, all the poetry of man, from the morning to the still distant twilight of sane man. Let the dwellers in the waste land live apart in their fantastic domain: to us, theirs must remain the kingdom of the blind, the deaf, the wholly dumb. We are heartened in our certitude by knowledge of poets who have, like Poe, stood upon the threshhold of sanity and remained sane; who have, like Blake, like Francis Thompson, passed easily across the borderline; who

have, like Coleridge, dared to transmit the wild sweet music of "Kubla Khan" unaltered, though its word was for something higher than sanity and deeper than thinking can yet fathom. It was a madman in England, late in the sixteenth century, an Abraham Man from Bedlam, who uttered his one high note that will blow triumphantly above a hundred waste lands:

> With an host of furious fancies,
> Whereof I am commander,
> With a burning spear and a horse of air
> To the wilderness I wander;
> By a knight of ghosts and shadows
> I summoned am to tourney
> Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end—
> Methinks it is no journey.

There are ears that catch the ghostly knight's call; its echo upon their tongues does not die. A feigned madness earns the mushroom plaudits of mushroom souls; but shrewder Time bares soon enough to its scorn the sham Abraham.

CHAPTER XIX

Sappho's Cousins

The glory of our poetry of today consists no less in the ten most important figures, than in the score and more who press just below them, and in the worthy many still farther from the Parnassian crest. A Shakespeare was not an isolated phenomenon: he grew tallest of a tall company, now obscured by his shade; but, without it, containing Marlowes, Fords, Websters, Jonsons, Fletchers, who would have been, apart from the mountain, impressive heights. In the end, some of the lesser singers of any age are remembered for a few songs, a single song, a single line; some are sponged forever from the overfull slate of man's memory. But they have served their essential function. We do not need to memorize the list of those who fought with their backs against the sunset at Tours; we remember that Charles Martel did not stand alone. There are queer shifts, too, in Time's evaluations: the last is not exiled forever from first; and some whose names even are nothing in the eyes of the watchers, may throw off the sable disguise and glitter in the end with the lions and the lilies.

The field is rich enough to justify more extended treatment than it can receive. At best a brief spread of the lyric feast can be set forth, to be enjoyed with the assurance that each of the poets treated has much more

to offer, and only awaits the seeking heart to pour out his full treasure.

Noteworthy among these lyricists is Charles L. O'Donnell, a Catholic clergyman connected with the University of Notre Dame. His songs have a stinging poignancy, which entitles him to a wide appreciation that is slow in arriving. His better poems hold a breathless loveliness and an inevitable sincerity: the tune is never forced by the mere wish to produce. His "Forgiveness" is quietly splendid:

Now God be thanked that roads are long and wide,
And four far havens in the scattered sky:
It would be hard to meet and pass you by.

And God be praised there is an end of pride,
And pity only has a word to say,
While memory grows dim as time grows gray.

For, God his word, I gave my best to you,
All that I had, the finer and the sweet,
To make—a path for your unquiet feet.

Their track is on the life they trample through;
Such evil steps to leave such hallowing.
Now God be with them in their wandering.

"Transformation," "Harvest Fields," "The Poet's Bread," "Requital," are among his finer songs. He has a deep religious note that knows the reverenced abstraction as breathing reality, as in the quatrains "The Son of God," and "Martha and Mary." In the chiselled miniature he is far superior to Father Tabb. Lacking Francis Thompson's sweep, he is finer in small; in his unfaltering song he brings his God near.

Sara Teasdale (Mrs. Ernst Filsinger) is a singer who has received the general approbation that Father O'Donnell still lacks. Her second volume, *Helen of Troy*, promised a wide sweet singing, especially in the noble blank verse monologs, moving, as in the title piece, with dignified beauty:

> Yet life is more than death;
> How could I leave the sound of singing winds,
> The strong sweet scent that breathes from off the sea,
> Or shut my eyes forever to the spring?
> I will not give the grave my hands to hold,
> My shining hair to light oblivion.

The pattern is monotonous; here is only one break in twenty-eight feet; yet there is a rounded majesty. *Rivers to the Sea*, the next collection, moves to a music at times richer and briefer, at times thinner and briefer. On rare occasions she has a more sustained music, as in the lyric cry commencing:

> One by one, like leaves from a tree,
> All my faiths have forsaken me;
> But the stars above my head
> Burn in white and delicate red,
> And beneath my feet the earth
> Brings the sturdy grass to birth.

This is even more apparent in "The Answer," one of her most glowing songs:

> When I go back to earth,
> And all my joyous body
> Puts off the red and white
> That once had been so proud,

If men should pass above me
With false and feeble pity,
My dust will find a voice
To answer them aloud:

"Be still, I am content,
Take back your poor compassion,
Joy was a flame in me
Too steady to destroy;
Lithe as a bending reed
Loving the storm that sways her—
I found more joy in sorrow
Than you could find in joy."

Even here, lines like "false and feeble pity" ring a trifle false and feeble, they are more deft than inevitable; artificiality replaces sincerity for the moment. In "Love Songs" and "Flame and Shadow" there is a nearer beauty, a rich music, a homely human note, a light exaltation, at times: although always these show in one song out of a dozen. "There Will Come Soft Rains" is one of her most evocative tunes:

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pool singing at night,
And wild plum-trees in tremulous white;

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims in a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Her work usually has a soft sweet cadence, rather than that torturing turn of the knife in the wound made by beauty which is the lyric ecstasy at its height.

The Benét brothers, William Rose and Stephen Vincent, are gifted singers lingering just below the chief rank. "Merchants from Cathay," the title poem in the elder's first volume, is a chant only a shade beneath "Lepanto" and "The Congo," with its thumping opening:

Their heels slapped their bumping mules; their fat chaps glowed;
Glory unto Mary, each seemed to wear a crown!
Like sunset their robes were on the wide, white road;
So we saw these mad merchants come dusting into town!

Two paunchy beasts they rode on and two they drove before.
May the Saints all help us, the tiger-stripes they had!
And the panniers upon them swelled full of stuffs and ore!
The Square buzzed and jostled at a sight so mad.

They bawled in their beards, and their turbans they wried.
They stopped by the stalls with curvetting and clatter.
As bronze as the bracken their necks and faces dyed—
And a stave they set singing, to tell us of the matter.

"For your silks, to Sugarmago! For your dyes, to Isfahan!
Weird fruits from the Isle o' Lamaree!
But for magic merchandise,
For treasure-trove and spice,
Here's a catch and a carol to the great, grand Chan,
The King of all the Kings across the sea!"

Poem after poem erupts with kaleidescopic whimsey, too opulently pelting to be wholly effective. "A Burglar

of the Zodiac," "The Horse Thief," and especially "Films," among his later works, have a chanting rainbow wonder only a little lower than the best of Lindsay; and, unlike the other poet, Benét's work shows a constant upward tendency.

The younger brother has a cleverness, a gusto, a tang not unlike the jollier work of Chesterton, although it has not yet swelled to that master's size:

> Pour me the stars of the seraphim
> Or the wine of God's chastising!
> All that I ask is the flooding brim
> Where the tides of the heart are rising!
>
> All that I ask is the ache of birth,
> Lords of the Planet Tally,
> And a girl to follow around the earth
> Or the wreck of a cause to rally.

There is no indication in his work that he has yet taken any cause seriously; but should he, we might expect body blows like the strong sonnet "Lunch at a City Club."

Witter Bynner, in "The Beloved Stranger," neared the line dividing slight singing from great singing; and at least once in *Grenstone Poems* he crossed it. He feels at times a rousing exultation:

> Behold the man alive in me,
> Behold the man in you!
> If there is God—am I not he?—
> Shall I myself undo?
>
> I have been waiting long enough. . . .
> Impossible gods, good-by!
> I wait no more. . . . The way is rough—
> But the god who climbs is I.

"A Masque of Life and Death" is astonishingly successful symbolism; "Union Square" and "The Fields" are sharp social vision; "To No One In Particular" is a charming song; but "A Thrush in the Moonlight" is one of the great American lyrics.

In came the moon and covered me with wonder,
Touched me and was near me and made me very still.
In came a rush of song, like rain after thunder,
Pouring importunate on my window-sill.

I lowered my head, I hid it, I would not see nor hear,
The birdsong had stricken me, had brought the moon too near.
But when I dared to lift my head, night began to fill
With singing in the darkness. And then the thrush grew still.

And the moon came in, and silence, on my window-sill.

Leonora Speyer is a singer whose work is constantly deepening and gaining in singing quality. "A Canopic Jar" was a distinctive volume, ranging from a feathery invocation to Pan:

> Blow, blow your pipes! And from afar
> I'll come, I'll be your bird, your star,
> Your wood, your nymph, your kiss, your rhyme,
> And all your godlike summer-time!

through the gamut to a sonnet as strongly startling as "The Ladder":

I had a sudden vision in the night—
I did not sleep, I dare not say I dreamed—
Beside my bed a pallid ladder gleamed
And lifted upward to the sky's dim height:

And every rung shone strangely in that light,
And every rung a woman's body seemed,
Outstretched, and down the sides her long hair streamed,
And you—you climbed that ladder of delight!

You climbed, sure-footed, naked rung by rung,
Clasped them and trod them, called them by their name,
And my name too I heard you speak at last;
You stood upon my breast the while and flung
A hand up to the next! And then—oh shame—
I kissed the foot that bruised me as it passed.

Her later periodical verse has shown a constant bettering of her manner. With her innate sincerity and musical method she should gain constantly in significance.

Bernice Lesbia Kenyon is one of the younger poets whose *Songs of Unrest* contains sonorous and well-considered poetry in many places, from impressive openings like:

The colourless thin voices of the dark
Grow fainter as the moon begins to rise,
And like a scimitar the river lies
Curving among pale trees with silvered bark.
Here at this height we stand, whose lips contain
Our vain protesting youth that stirs and cries
Dumbly within us. Under widened skies
Star-deep in silence, how should we complain?
The hours move shining toward their shining end,
Brimmed with broad moonlight and the damp of earth.
We are but misers who are forced to spend
Our heritage of time, and face long dearth
Of wordless nights beneath moon-whitened trees,
In years to come, more desolate than these.

This ends on a fine note; many of her songs are as fine throughout:

Poet, you write me fair who are fair today,
And make me immortally fair to suit your whim;
For your word, when the breath dies out, by a secret way
Makes sport of Death, forever eluding him.

Have pity, and write me wise who am never wise!
I would wear magnificence like a glittering dress,
So clothed in the folds of your sweet unperishing lies
No later one shall discover my littleness.

Even in this first flight, she has a fresh and lingering beauty; there is every reason why she should continue upward.

Genevieve Taggard, in her *For Eager Lovers*, gives memorable poems and piquing promise. "First Miracle" is full-throated song:

There was a time when Mother Nature made
My soul's sun, and my soul's shade.

A cloud in the sky could take away
The song in my heart for all day,

And a little lark in a willow-tree
Would mean happiness to me.

My moods would mirror all her whims;
Trees were my strength; their limbs, my limbs.

But, oh, my mother tortured me,
Blowing with wind, and sighing with sea.

I flamed, I withered, I blossomed, I sang,
With her I suffered pang for pang,

Until I said: "I will grow my own tree
Where no natural wind will bother me."

And I grew me a willow of my own heart's strength,
With my will for its width, and my wish for its length:

And I made me a bird of my own heart's fire,
To sing my own sun, and my own desire.

And a vast white circle came in the air,
And the winds around said, "Don't blow there."

I said, "Blow on—blow, blow, blow, blow,
Fill all the sky, above, below,
With tempest, and sleet and silence and snow!

"Wherever I go, no matter where,
My bird and my willow-tree are there.

"However you frown, no matter how,
I will sing as I am singing now."

The folk rhythm of "Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John" is one of the rhythm strands woven here; and nothing could be more heartening for our poetry than a rediscovery of the wide beauty of the folk rhythms loved in childhood, and shrugged away thereafter. There is little in the book that falters; "Ice Age" is magnificent, though overlong, and lyrics like "Forever Lost" need no slightest polishing:

Forever lost—like birds forever flying,
Searching bleak space,
Circling, and with the south wind crying
Across earth's face:

Arrowed I fly, and like them lost forever,
Having once seen
Scarlet in a jungle, by a deep river—
Scarlet and green.

Ridgeley Torrence is a poet who has not yet collected his poems into volume form; but the magazine appearance assures him no low standing. His rhapsodic "Eye-Witness" is among his finest pieces—an appearance of the Christ to a tramp, with the ecstatic song:

I will sing, I will go, and never ask me "Why?"
I was born a rover and a passer-by.

I seem to myself like water and sky,
A river and a rover and a passer-by. . . .

As I went suffering through the snow,
Something like a shadow came moving slow. . . .

My heart went open like an apple sliced;
I saw my Saviour and I saw my Christ. . . .

I asked him in front of the station-house wall
If he had lodgings. Says, "None at all."

I pointed to my heart, and looked in his face.—
"Here,—if you haven't got a better place."

He looked and he said: "Oh, we still must roam,
But if you'll keep it open, well, I'll call it home."

Willard Wattles is another singer of religious themes, who can pass from a delicious jazz theophany:

Jesus, Jesus,
What are you worth?
"The sun and the moon
And the little round earth." . . .

Jesus, Jesus,
Go along, Lord;
My knee is straight
As the governor's sword.

into music as hauntingly lovely as:

I will arise when I am drunk of sunlight,
Fostered of wind and intimate with earth,
Back to the lengthening shadows of the mountains,
The inviolate snowfields of the river's birth.

and into a triumphant Elizabethan love song;

Tonight, the country wine was clear
And you were deft to hand it;
Yet now you lie beside me, dear,
You scarcely understand it.
You brought a leaf of lavender,
And I blew out the candle. . . .
You do not breathe or yield or stir,
With mystery to handle.

I know, my sweet, that day will come
And bring a gray reminder,
Yet in the flying hours of night
You need but be the kinder.
I know that every burnished star
Will fade to ash above me,
Yet . . . nestle to me as you are,
And while you love me, love me.

I know that I must rise at dawn
To take the dusty highway;
And you must stay behind, or go,
But never travel my way.
There is no seal of love to bind,
(No touch of mine has bound you)—
Perhaps another night will find
Another's arms around you,

But now tonight the fire lies still
Upon the rosy ceiling;
Across the moonlit window-sill
The jasmine scent is stealing.

Your golden hair about my face
And I who lean above you;
Tonight, tonight, dear, draw me close. . . .
And while you love me, love me.

Grace Hazard Conkling is the author of at least one lyric which is great and permanent, in *Tampico,* where she says of the passion-flowers:

I fear their somber yellow deeps,
Their whirling fringe of black,
And he who gives a passion-flower
Always asks it back.

There are many lovely things in her volumes, but none quite up to this high mood. Hilda Conkling, the poet's daughter, not yet in her teens, is perhaps the youngest poet publishing today; but many of the songs of Mary Carolyn Davies are perennially younger. Young poems are not all consequential; this does not take from their charm:

Your kiss
Is on my face
Like the first snow
On bewildered grass—

This is one of the pond-surface poems; there is more poignancy in "The Door" and "The Dead Make Rules." "A Ballad of Mary" is maturely lovely, with the fine ending:

Joseph smoothed her pillow down,
Held a cup of mead.
Joseph's ways were thoughtful ways
For a woman's need.

As upon her stable-bed
  Yellow-sweet with hay,
With deep eyes that none could read,
  Stilly Mary lay,

Slow she smiled and grateful wise;
  Let no half-look tell
Joseph seemed a sober man
  After Gabriel.

William Alexander Percy, from the far South, mounts to lyric ecstasy at times, as in "Overtones":

I heard a bird at break of day
  Sing from the autumn trees
A song so mystical and calm,
  So full of certainties,
No man, I think, could listen long
  Except upon his knees.
Yet this was but a simple bird,
  Alone, among dead trees.

David Morton, haling from the nearer South, is master of the soft dreamy sonnet. He achieves a sustained remote beauty, constant, haunting in a gentle way, yet lacking the vigor that has always burned in the highest poetry. His most characteristic mood appears in "Old Ships":

There is a memory stays upon old ships,
  A weightless cargo in the musty hold,—
Of bright lagoons and prow-caressing lips,
  Of stormy midnights,—and a tale untold.
They have remembered islands in the dawn,
  And windy capes that tried their slender spars,
The tortuous channels where their keels have gone,
  And calm, blue nights of stillness and the stars.

Ah, never think that ships forget a shore,
Or bitter seas, or winds that made them wise;
There is a dream upon them evermore;—
And there be some who say that sunk ships rise,
To seek familiar harbours in the night,
Blowing in mists, their spectral sails like light.

Even more effective is "The School Boy Reads His Iliad":

The sounding battles leave him nodding still:
The din of javelins at the distant wall
Is far too faint to wake that weary will
That all but sleeps for cities where they fall.
He cares not if this Helen's face were fair,
Nor if the thousand ships shall go or stay;
In vain the rumbling chariots throng the air
With sounds the centuries shall not hush away.

Beyond the window where the Spring is new,
Are marbles in a square, and tops again,
And floating voices tell him what they do,
Luring his thought from these long-warring men,—
And though the camp be visited with gods,
He dreams of marbles and of tops, and nods.

He has shaped lovely lines; but they are tired silver, rather than gay gold.

We find both metals in the more impassioned and less insistently perfect sonnets of Arthur Davison Ficke. There is at least the silver of Morton in the haunting cadences of "November Dusk" and the Elizabethan shapeliness of "Since Beauty Holds No Lease of Settled Date"; there is a vigor alien to the gentler singer in "The Violin" and the finale to "Epitaph for the Poet: IV." Few modern sonnets hold more sober excellence than:

Not all my will can change this casque of bone
That predetermines what each thought must be:
And I have learned to bear with these my own
Enforced defects and doomed futility,
And with reproach no longer rack a skull
Whose rigid plan, conditioned long ago,
Left such low arches for the beautiful
To pour its summer light through. Now I know
Somewhat the measure of what may be done
And may not by this child of a dark race
Who in the long processions of the sun
Today for a brief moment takes his place.
I bid him bear his banner with the rest,
Nor too much blame the dusk that haunts his breast.

Since these early "Sonnets of a Portrait Painter," his work has grown steadily in simplicity and beauty, until he has reached a singing as exquisite as the lyric commencing:

Long and lovely, cool and white,
She lay beside me all the night.

Long and lovely, hushed and warm,
She touched me, thigh and breast and arm.

My body was one tremulous sense
Of her slight body's excellence.

I was a drowned man, in the sea
Of her immaculate melody.

A perennial phenomenon is that of a noisy critical clique attracted by some admired excess in a poet, which expands that poet's name far beyond its desert or its permanent site. Miss Millay has been enshrined by such a group for her cleverness; and Louise Bogan has been

touted as high by another breed for an astringent quality which is, in essence, mere obscurity. Her lines are often lovely; and she shapes a slight thought well, as when out of her disillusionment over love and treasure she says:

> I'll lie here and learn
> How, over their ground,
> Trees make a long shadow
> And a light sound.

When she essays more of an idea, she is either over-sociological (as in "Women"), or over-cryptic. Thus one poem opens:

> Men loved wholly beyond wisdom
> Have the staff without the banner.

On third or fourth thought, this is true and apt; but it is so undersaid, that one of its crowns is its perfect adaptability for expansion in third-year high school themes. This poem ends:

> To be quiet in the fern
> Like a thing gone dead and still,
> Listening to the prisoned cricket
> Shake its terrible, dissembling
> Music in the granite hill.

The music of this is lovely; but it is clear neither as poetry nor as nature-note. She has beauty, but it is as unpleasant to experience as a visit to the dentist. Her poems resolve themselves into a guessing contest; they are dried and shrunken nubbins of the Hesperides. The

essence of her poetry is too condensed to retain any of the perfume that is poetry's enduring charm; or, if retained, is has concentrated into small bitterness.

Gamaliel Bradford has achieved many finished lyrics, some stinging with a Heine-like bitterness, some with a whimsical detachment, some brightly loving. He can talk with wrought vigor:

If praying to the saints could comfort,
  Bribing with candle or with vow,
They might ensconce my soul in some fort
  More sure and safe than I know now.

To kneel before a tawdry altar,
  Propitiate a wooden Christ—
If this could strengthen hopes that falter,
  My pride were fitly sacrificed.

But heathen god and Roman martyr
  And Calvin's trinity as well
Have wholly forfeited their charter.—
  I yearn at times for wholesome hell.

The gayer side of Thomas Hardy's plaint of crabbed age in love speaks in "Anacreon's Apology":

An eye where love with laughter twinkles,
  And songs on kisses still insistent,
Blended with graying hair and wrinkles,
  To you, my child, seem inconsistent?

In fact, you think such conduct shocking?
  The old should mind their souls and purses?
Ah, youthful blood, refrain from mocking
  Till you can only kiss in verses.

No Heine could see love more factually:

I had visited her often,
  Long had sought, with vain endeavor,
Her obdurate heart to soften;
  But she answered, "Never, never."

Then it softened and ran widely,
  Like an ink-drop on a blotter.
I ceased labor, tasted idly,
  Found it bitter, and forgot her.

He can also sing in the gay ancient music:

Thick and stormy was the night,
  Not a single star,
When I climbed to my delight
  Where the roses are;

Where the roses are, and love,
  In a bower warm,
Climbing up to heaven above
  Night and wind and storm.

Babbette Deutsch is a vigorous experimenter, but she has done nothing better than her melodious sonnets:

There is the loneliness of peopled places,
Streets roaring with their human flood: the crowd
That fills bright rooms with billowing sounds and faces,
Like foreign music, overshrill and loud.
There is the loneliness of one who stands
Fronting the waste under the cold sea-light,
A wisp of flesh against the endless sands,
Like a lost gull in solitary flight.

Single is all up-rising and down-lying;
Struggle or fear or silence none may share;
Each is alone in bearing, and in dying;
Conquest is unaccompanied as despair.
But I have known no loneliness like this,
Locked in your arms and bent beneath your kiss.

Harry Kemp, author of the vivid biography *Tramping on Life,* is a poet by nature, whose ultimate utterance often stammers. He is amusing in his over-muscled lyrics, "The Song of Red Riley," "Bob," and the rest; he is not quite convincing in the carefully wrought "Cresseid"; but in an infrequent lyric he does all that his admirers seek in each of his songs. The conclusion of "Resurrection" is exquisite:

I hope there is a resurrection day
For bodies, as the grey-beard prophets say,
When Helen's naked limbs again will gleam
Regathered from the dust of death's long dream,
And all the olden beauties, being fair,
Will take the watching angels unaware
And make God's heavenly meadows doubly sweet
With rosy vagrancy of little feet.

There is a contagious courage in his song:

Tell them, O Sky-born, when I die
With high romance to wife,
That I went out as I had lived,
Drunk with the joy of life.

Yea, say that I went down to death
Serene and unafraid,
Still loving Song, but loving more
Life, of which Song is made!

A more sustained, albeit a slighter, song is Jessie B. Rittenhouse's. Her discriminating mind, which her enduring anthologies bear witness to, has elided all but the best of her poems from her collections. They walk the same road as Sara Teasdale's, with a music a trifle fainter. "Return" is typical:

You came again, but silence
Had fallen on your heart,
And in your eyes were visions
That held us still apart.

And now I go on hearing
The words you did not say,
And the kiss you did not give me
Burns on my lips today.

"Confession" has a harmony as fine:

Hear the words that I would speak,
Take the kiss that I would give,
If Life, the long-withholding,
Should one day bid us live.

But I bear a coward's heart,
Thinking only of the pain
When hands that clasp so closely
Shall be unclasped again.

A melody as quietly sustained is found in several of the finer songs in James Larkin Pearson's "Castle Gates," an unnoticed volume from the mid South:

In sunny Spain, upon my broad estates,
I have a castle with an hundred gates;
My stately palms and cedars are astir
With all the gentle winds that never were.

Within, my halls and chambers are perfumed
With bright, perpetual flowers that never bloomed,
And dreamy maids by gallant knights are led
To banquet tables that were never spread.

Karle Wilson Baker's work has an affecting music, although the singer is curiously cloaked from the verses, much to the regret of the curious reader. "I Shall Be Loved as Quiet Things" has this "silver reticence":

I shall be loved as quiet things
Are loved—white pigeons in the sun,
Curled yellow leaves that whisper down
One after one;

The silver reticence of smoke
That tells no secret of its birth
Among the fiery agonies
That turn the earth;

Cloud-islands; reaching arms of trees;
The frayed and eager little moon
That strays unheeded through a high
Blue afternoon.

The thunder of my heart must go
Under the muffling of the dust—
As my grey dress has guarded it
The grasses must;

For it has hammered loud enough,
Clamored enough, when all is said;
Only its quiet part shall live
When I am dead.

William Griffith is an even softer singer, a laureate of Pierrot, a tongue for the serene joy of things:

I, who laughed my youth away
And blew bubbles to the sky,
Thin as air and frail as fire,
Opals, pearls of such desire
As a saint could but admire;
Now as azure as a sigh,
Then with passion all aglow—
Golden, crimson, purple, gray
Moods and moments of a day—
Have been gay,
Yea,
As they,
Sailing high,
Sinking low;
Even so
I,
Pierrot,
Walking Paris in a trance,
With my weary feet in France
And my heart in Bergamo,
Loved—and lost my laughing way.

I, of course, have never had
Any great amount of gold
Other than my bubbles hold.
Love? I have no loving plan
As a guide to beast or man,
Being neither good nor bad,
Just a sort of sorry lad.

Equally as delicate is the art of Edward J. O'Brien, especially in his chiseled "Hellenica," and the song beginning:

Fair body, flower not in vain,
Nor let thy beauty rust,
When April flowers and April rain
Renew thy dreaming dust.

Mary Dixon Thayer, one of the younger singers, can weave lines as lovely as:

> Where the shadows
> On the grass
> Stretch pale bodies,
> There I pass.

She does not hold herself to this high plane; but she is capable of it. Olive Tilford Dargan, especially in her latest work, reaches lyric notes of crystal clarity:

> The winter has grown so still
> I can stand at the foot of the hill
> Where the stream beneath the bridge
> Is dry as a heart after grief,
> And hear at the top of the ridge
> The wind as it lifts a leaf.

She achieves too a fine ecstasy in her higher flights:

> And this, my Earth, I know;
> Though for my hand
> Space hold out spheres like roses, and
> Like country lanes their orbits blow,
> If thou be green, and blossom still,
> Then I must downward go;
> Leave stars to keep
> House as they will;
> The winds to walk, or turn and sleep;
> Seas to spare or kill.
> Behind my back shall sunsets burn
> Bereft of my concern;
> Each wonder passed
> Shall feed my haste,
> Till I have paused as now,
> Beneath a bending orchard bough,—
> An April apple bough
> Where Southern waters creep.

Scudder Middleton moves from brave certitude like:

> Some find the fruit like Hercules—
> For such the moon and sun may stop;
> Yet never doubt that Sisyphus
> Achieved at last the mountain top.

to a music as fine as Mrs. Dargan's, as in his "Deliverance":

> Tell them, where stream and ocean meet,
> God's Heaven is a lonely place,
> That I return to Birth and Death
> And Love's uncertain gift of grace.

A light companion piece to this is Oliver Herford's "Earth":

> If this little world to-night
> Suddenly should fall through space
> In a hissing, headlong flight,
> Shrivelling from off its face,
> As it falls into the sun,
> In an instant every trace
> Of the little crawling things—
> Ants, philosophers, and lice,
> Cattle, cockroaches, and kings,
> Beggars, millionaires, and mice,
> Men and maggots—all as one,
> As it falls into the sun,
> Who can say but at the same
> Instant, from some planet far
> A child may watch us, and exclaim:
> "See the pretty shooting star!"

A homelier beginning is found in Christopher Morley's "To a Post-Office Inkwell," with an ending as poignant:

Your pool of ink, your scratchy pen,
Have moved the lives of unborn men,
And watched young people, breathing hard,
Put Heaven on a postal card.

Elias Lieberman passes from deft songs to a healthy satiric vigor, as in "Brothers":

Noon in the park. . . . A tropic sun
  Dazzles with light and chokes with heat.
Sleepers about you. . . . Notice one
  Stretching his length on a wooden seat.
His face is blotched and puffy and seared,
  Sweat drips down from the clammy skin;
Flies romp on a stubble of beard,—
  A bundle of dirt with a soul therein.

Noon at the club. . . . A welcome shade
  Dulls the light and cools the heat.
Gentleman seated. . . . Lemonade
  Dashed with cognac and something sweet.
Arms dangling limply down,
  Feet tapping the polished floor. . .
Yawning and stretching. . . . No one in town. . . .
  Not a soul. . . . What a beastly bore!

Amanda Benjamin Hall's sure touch is nowhere more in evidence than in the clever "In My Opinion":

The Aged sitting on their shelves
With knitting and the cat
Make talk of Youth among themselves,
Deploring this and that. . . .

Youngsters, let them not abash
Your lovely, witness school—
They'd give their riches to be rash,
And twenty, and a fool!

Muna Lee's exquisite sonnet, "It Will Be Easy to Love You when I am Dead," shows one of her finest moods; but the delicate "Song in the Hills" is no less perfect, where she says of her singing:

> And it will hardly still a grief,
> Nor turn a heart from aching—
> But there's a windy hill that knows
> What joy was in its making!

No one of Hazel Hall's "Walkers," the sound of feet passing, as it comes to a thoughtful poet seated in a shadow, is more effective than this etching, with its faint and shocking refrain:

> She walks with a gravely conscious tread,
> As though she carries above her head
> A banner whose flaming inscription runs
> In charactery dazzling as the sun's.
> And little old winds, like little brown elves,
> Run at her side and talk to themselves.
>
> If you look deep as she carries it by
> You will see the red inscription's cry:
> *There is earth below, there is sky above,*
> *And life is music and laughter and love.*
> You will see the winds, like little brown elves,
> Wink at each other and talk to themselves.

Paul Tanaquil is one of the most accomplished of the younger singers, whether in sharp vision like "The Pedant":

> Pelican-like he wags his greyish head
> And his raised arms are like the wings of birds;
> He may have dreamed once, but his dream is dead,
> Choked as he grubbed in tomes for roots of words;

So whilst through lexicons his fingers roam
In philologic hunt, he has forgot
How crimson roses flamed through ancient Rome
And slender lilies shone in Camelot!

or in the charming sophistication of "When Gabriel Blows His Trump":

When Gabriel blows his trump and all the angels
Attack their instruments with a loud shout,
You'll draw St. Peter aside to whisper shyly:
"I'm tired of dancing: let's sit this one out!"

En tete a tete you'll give him a gardenia
Out of your bouquet . . . and when it strikes eleven
You'll smile: "I have refused six supper-partners,
I wanted *you* to take me into Heaven!"

Harold Vinal, the distinguished editor of *Voices,* is a poet first of the sea; but his touch is firm on almost any theme:

Birds build their nests in every sort of tree
When the wood violets have started growing,
Down the bright orchards they wing suddenly
All in a gust, after the last bleak snowing,
After the winter crows have started going.
I've had them pass in hundreds over me,
A spatter against April sky, a sea
Of April wings, sudden as the cock's crowing.

As I came down the pasture yesterday,
I noted how the branches were astir
With more than budding apple blossoms swinging.
I heard above my head a sudden whir
Of conversation on a sudden spray—
And then a robin-couple started singing.

Howard Mumford Jones, as his *Gargoyles* showed, is a lyric poet of shrewd vigor, which at times chokes his pure singing notes. This from his "Librarians" is strong and typical:

Behind the desk stand the librarians,
  Bleak women, spare and angular and thin,
  Impersonal as God or Death, and in
Their eyes and on each mask-like countenance

Sits changeless irony to watch your whim.
  You ask for Shakespeare, and no more, no less
  Than if an equal fervor you express
For something dull and dead, you get of him.

They pile the centuries like building blocks,
  And nest dead Caesar with a magazine;
  Indecently, behind an office screen,
They watch the masters numbered up like stocks.

Levelling all things in a catalog,
  They yield, and now withhold, imperial kings
  From any giggling girl that blithely rings
For pilots in her intellectual fog.

To sport with dead men as these women do—
  Is it so strange they look a little mad?

The lovely opening of "Immortality" lifts to a biting end:

Eunice, when this wild music that we hear
Is silent, and the fever and the passion,
The rich mouth shaping to a lover's kiss,
The bosom and the arms of you, the fear
Of loss, the hope of some dim, ultimate bliss—
When all this arch is dust which now we fashion,

And you are grass upspringing from a grave,
And I in some far corner of the world
Enrich the earth by one more lover's heart,
They will not know the good we worked to save,
They will not care what stars we saw, or start
Because upon my breast your hand is curled!

Instead, the *Tribune* on its thirteenth page,
In little type, along with stocks and such,
(And marriages) will list your name and mine,
And Christian Shimultowski's name and age,
And Mamie Kaeppler's, dead at forty-nine,
Beloved wife of John, who mourns her much.

The line cannot be allowed to stretch out to the crack of doom. There are enough worthy poets to reach a long way yet. It is enough to know that the canon of English lyric poetry in America is ably carried on by many others, among whom the most outstanding today are Winifred Welles, Haniel Long, Corinne Roosevelt Robinson, Florence Kiper Frank, Marjorie Allen Seiffert, Marjorie Meeker, Maxwell Anderson, John Farrar, Leslie Nelson Jennings, Power Dalton, Edwin Curran, Richard Le Gallienne, and Marguerite Wilkinson. Among the few serious poems of Arthur Guiterman and Berton Braley are a number of lyrics wholly effective. Charles Wharton Stork, whose *Contemporary Verse* is known to all lovers of poetry, has written lovely things, nothing more so than this sharp image, "Standards":

White is the skimming gull on the somber green of the fir-
trees,
Black is the soaring gull on a snowy glimmer of cloud.

The brief blank verse lyric, often in polyrhythmic verse, has been shaped to singing beauty by many of these

poets. Morris Abel Beer, an adept as well in rhyme, in "Tea-Rose" furnishes an excellent example of this polished form:

Draw nearer, moon,
Yellow and slender, blowing venturously
Against the steel-towered city.
My window is open.
Scatter your delicate, soft petals
Over my floor.
Fill my dim room with your shimmering fragrance.
Come, let me catch
The perfume of the skies!

There is no one of these with a more abiding magic than Orrick Johns, in those rare moments when he lets song speak, as in "Little Things," "Dilemma," "The Interpreter." A wonder as authentic speaks in this poem signed "Adul Tima":

They are unholy who are born
To love wild plum at night,
Who once have passed it on a road
Glimmering and white.

It is as though the darkness had
Speech of silver words,
Or as though a cloud of stars
Perched like ghostly birds.

They are unpitied from their birth
And homeless in men's sight,
Who love better than the earth
Wild plum at night.

The singing of these two recent lyricists, Joyce Kilmer and Gladys Cromwell, is closed now; but for every one

departed a dozen new singers appear in each month's poetry magazines. As long as the poetic mortality is this ineffective, as long as the fluttering seeds of song bring such rich and continued harvest, there need be no fear for the immediate future of American song.

CHAPTER XX

Out of the Depths

In the time of Abraham, according to the account in Genesis, there was a fountain or spring in the southern wilderness of Canaan called En-mishpat—the Well of Justice. This was the gathering ground where the rude usages of the wilderness Israelite clans were declared, in the name of Jehovah. Its other name was Kadesh—the Holy Place. The perversion of this justice, according to the story in Samuel, was one of the causes that led to the setting up of the Hebrew monarchy. In the thunder-throated words of the Hebrew prophets, which antedated the final crystallization of the historical books, the demand for justice was voiced by these violent poets in unforgettable strength and beauty:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

You who turn justice to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth.

For you have turned justice into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock.

Thus far Amos. Hosea continues,

They have spoken mighty words, swearing falsely in making a covenant; thus justice springeth up as hemlock in the furrows of the field.

Ephraim is oppressed and broken in justice.

Micah sings more softly:

> What does Jehovah require of thee, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?

Isaiah is full of the same song:

> Learn to do well; seek justice.
>
> Zion shall be redeemed with justice.
>
> Woe to those who turn aside the needy from justice!
>
> Jehovah is a God of justice.
>
> Princes shall rule in justice.
>
> Behold my Servant, whom I sustain—my Chosen, in whom my soul delighteth. I have put forth my spirit upon him. He shall bring forth justice to the nations. . . . A cracked reed he shall not break, and the dimly burning wick he shall not extinguish. He shall faithfully bring forth justice. He shall not fail nor be discouraged till he have set justice in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law.

Zephaniah, in a noble figure, says that every morning Jehovah brings his justice to light. The same strain is in all of the early and many of the late prophets. "Mishpat"—justice—the ancient clan brotherhood—this was what must come again.

Nor is this fierce hunger and thirst after justice and righteousness confined to the Semite. Plutarch tells how it shook late Sparta, and mid-Rome. Euripides and Aristophanes are not silent upon the theme; Alcaeus even earlier shadowed it; ancient Japan, Egypt, Persia, Korea,

India, Babylon, Scandinavia, Arabia, China, groaned with it. We are familiar with no literature in which it is not found. The fathers of the early Christian church were eloquent upon it; the Middle Ages knew it. There are forthright words upon it in Piers Plowman, in Shakespeare, Raleigh, Burns, Gerald Massey, Ernest Jones, Shelley, Southey, Coleridge, Swinburne, Wilde, Hood, both the Brownings, William Morris, Kipling's unexpected "Sons of Martha," Francis Adams, even gentle Austin Dobson. Today Chesterton, Gibson, Hodgson, MacGill, sing of—

The scorned—the rejected—the men hemmed in with the spears; . . .

Not the ruler for me, but the ranker, the tramp of the road,
The slave with the sack on his shoulders pricked on with the goad,
The man with too weighty a burden, too weary a load. . . .

Mine be the dirt and the dross, the dust and scum of the earth,

as Masefield worded it, before he turned to themes drawn from fox-hunting and horse racing.

The earlier American singing included this note—this passionate indignation against social injustice. It came from Greatheart Whitman, it trembled musically out of Lanier's most heartfelt singing; Stephen Crane, Moody, Traubel, John Boyle O'Reilly, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edwin Markham—the list is a memorable one. Robinson's "Cassandra," Frost's "The Parlor Joke," much of Masters, Lindsay, Sandburg, are surcharged with the same note. It speaks in the most unexpected places,

as in this "Darkness Before Dawn," a revolutionary hymn by Gellett Burgess:

God of our sires, Who reigneth so unsteadily,
Nodding on Thy heavenly throne, impassive to our care,
Worshipful and wonderful, we shall forgive thee readily
If thou canst shake thy sloth and give attention to our prayer. . . .

Sleek were Thy priests and awful was Thy Trinity.
Wild were the wars Thou hast smiled at, from on high!
Tyrants and tortures attested Thy divinity,
Living, we should praise Thee, and worshiping should die! . . .

Long was the night; Thy dream obsessed us wearily;
Now, half awakening, we hunger for the day!
Purblind our eyes, but we see Thy presence eerily—
Stand Thou aloof, Lord, till WE have found the way! . . .

So, ere the dawn, when tyrant chains are fettering,
This is our word to Thee, a last and scornful prayer.
No more we trust Thy power of any lightest bettering:
Make Thy load too burdensome for human kind to bear! . . .

Nay, we beseech! O grant us this vicissitude,
The last screw of anguish, extremity of wrong:
Then, O Eternal One, have done with Thy solicitude:
Then shall we arise as Men: despair shall make us strong. . . .

Sleep, then, and dream: and let her slave Thou scorified
Snatch up Thy majesty and wield it once again!
Lo! Thou hast failed, but Man, divinely glorified,
He shall achieve alone the Brotherhood of Man!

A note quite as strong in its masculinity appears in one of our most graceful lyricists, Margaret Widdemer, entitled "God and the Strong Ones":

"We have made them fools and weak!" said the Strong Ones:
"We have bound them, they are dumb and deaf and blind,
We have crushed them in our hands like a heap of crumbling sands,
We have left them naught to seek or find.
They are quiet at our feet!" said the Strong Ones.
"We have made them one with wood and stone and clod;
Serf and laborer and woman, they are less than wise or human!—"
"I shall raise the weak!" saith God.

"They are stirring in the dark!" said the Strong Ones,
"They are struggling, who were moveless like the dead,
We can hear them cry and strain hand and foot against the chain,
We can hear their heavy upward tread. . . .
What if they are restless?" said the Strong Ones,
"What if they have stirred beneath the rod?
Fools and weak and blinded men, we can tread them down again—"
"Shall ye conquer me?" saith God. . . .

"They will trample us and bind!" said the Strong Ones;
"We are crushed beneath the blackened feet and hands,
All the strong and fair and great they will crush from out the state,
They will whelm it with the weight of pressing sands—
They are maddened and are blind!" said the Strong Ones,
"Black decay has come where they have trod,
They will break the world in twain if their hands are on the rein—"
"What is that to me?" saith God.

"Ye have made them in their strength, who were Strong Ones,
Ye have only taught the blackness ye have known;
These are evil men and blind?—Ay, but molded to your mind!
How shall ye cry out against your own?
Ye have held the light and beauty I have given
Far above the muddied ways where they must plod,
Ye have builded this your lord with the lash and with the sword—
Reap what ye have sown!" saith God.

It is possible that the solemn style may be defended here; but its absence would hardly mar. In "The Factories," her first volume, this poet has other verses with a singing social note; none quite equals this. Her vision of "War" is clear:

Only one thing we women know of war—
We must, when all is said,
Kneel in the land of slave or conqueror,
Defeated with our dead.

Her more typical theme is the shapely love lyric, like "A Cyprian Woman" which opens:

Under dusky laurel leaf,
Scarlet leaf of rose,
I lie prone, who have known
All a woman knows—

Love and grief and motherhood,
Fame and mirth and scorn;
These are all shall befall
Any woman born.

Here is one of the few modern usages of "asphodel" which we heartily commend. Rare poems in her subse-

quent books have the same charm; the magic at times is choked by the swirling "cloak of dreams."

A singing social passion breathes through "Scum o' the Earth," by Robert Haven Schauffler, with its high-spirited defense of the immigrant stock. Ruth Comfort Mitchell is another lyricist whose "The Night Court" gave modern utterance to the ancient cry, with a clarified vision. Sarah N. Cleghorn has a biting satire all her own, as in this quatrain:

> The golf links lie so near the mill
> That almost every day
> The laboring children can look out
> And see the men at play.

One of the most effective of all these poems is Florence Wilkinson Evans' "The Flower Factory," with its fine broken music:

Lisabetta, Marianina, Fiametta, Teresina,
They are winding stems of roses, one by one, one by one,
Little children who have never learned to play;
Teresina crying softly that her fingers ache today;
Tiny Fiametta nodding when the twilight slips in, gray.
High above the clattering street, ambulance and fire-gong beat.
They sit, curling crimson petals, one by one, one by one.

Lisabetta, Marianina, Fiametta, Teresina,
They have never seen a rosebush nor a dewdrop in the sun.
They will dream of the vendetta, Teresina, Fiametta,
Of a Black Hand and a face behind a grating;
They will dream of cotton petals, endless, crimson, suffocating,
Never of a wild-rose thicket nor the singing of a cricket,
But the ambulance will bellow through the wanness of their dreams,
And their tired lids will flutter with the street's hysteric screams.

Lisabetta, Marianina, Fiametta, Teresina,
They are winding stems of roses, one by one, one by one.
Let them have a long long playtime, Lord of Toil, when toil
is done,
Fill their baby hands with roses, joyous roses of the sun!

The conclusion might have shaken with the prophet's indignation. Max Eastman, known for his libertarian activities, lets the note occasionally appear in his shapely verse:

Ice is marching down the river,
Gaily out to sea!
Sing the healthy-hearted ever,
Spring is liberty!

He is more direct in this word of "Diogenes":

A hut, and a tree,
And a hill for me,
And a piece of weedy meadow.
I'll ask no thing
Of God or king
But to clear away his shadow.

Samuel A. De Witt is the one American poet who has been excluded from an American legislature, after legal election, for his political beliefs. His address "To Thaddeus C. Sweet," who presided over the ousting from the New York Assembly, mounts with clipped art to a heartening conclusion:

For what you did and what you said
Farmers dropped their scythes and bled;
And for the puppets in round rows
Bare feet tracked the olden snows—

Feet that wrote for tyrant George
A bloody print at Valley Forge;
And you forget that there are men
Glad to march that way again.

In "Riding the Storm," in which the poem above appears, is another menacing note:

If I were the March wind,
If I held his passion,
I would find use for it
In a grim fashion.

His second volume, "Iron Monger," contains one lyric especially memorable, "To an Old Tin Can":

There was a time when you were whole
And full; and yet were less
In the fine measure of a soul
Than you are now in emptiness.

Ah! Then you sat upon a shelf
With others like you, trim and nice;
But then you did not own yourself,
And then you had a price.

Charles Erskine Scott Wood, born in 1852, a West Point graduate who served in several Indian campaigns, now a retired lawyer living in Portland, Oregon, is the author of "The Poet in the Desert" (1915), a long rhapsodic colloquy between the Poet and Truth. In spite of frequent limps and halts in the artisanship, there are moments of great beauty and intransigent truth throughout it. The rhythm at its best shows more kinship to the Old Testament than to Whitman; but it mounts out of this in high spots, like this nature picture:

The lean coyote, prowler of the night,
Slips to his rocks fastnesses.
Jack-rabbits noiselessly shuttle among the sage-brush,
And from the castellated cliffs
Rock-ravens launch their proud black sails upon the day.
The wild horses troop back to their pastures.

Many of his shorter sayings are effective, at times with the rhythm of verse, at times more scattering:

Nothing is ever blotted.
Even the grass-roots remember when they have fed on blood.

The death of the soul is authority,
None is fit to govern another.
Self-choice is best, even though it blunder.

The poem ends on an invocation to Revolution—

You are our only hope, our only redeemer.
Come, with thunder and with lightning,
That the air may be clear.
Come, with deluge and tempest, that the earth may be purified.
Come, with agony and bloody rain, that Life may be born anew.

This is, of course, eloquence rather than poetry. He identifies Revolution as Death, which is to "utterly destroy This distorted and mis-shapen world." This is at least a unique proposal to solve social ills. There would be no weeds upon the fields, if there were no fields. This is hardly a final word.

A more melodious word, a younger vision, is shown in the work of Lola Ridge, a native of Australia now

living in New York. Her "The Ghetto" is full of haunting song:

Cool inaccessible air
Is floating in velvety blackness shot with steel-blue lights,
But no breath stirs the heat
Leaning its ponderous bulk upon the Ghetto. . . .

Nude glory of the moon!
That leaps like an athlete on the bosoms of the young girls
stripped of their linens;
Stroking their breasts that are smooth and cool as mother-
of pearl
Till the nipples tingle and burn as though little lips plucked
at them.
They shudder and grow faint.
And their ears are filled with a delirious rhapsody,
That Life, like a drunken player,
Strikes out of their clear white bodies
As out of ivory keys.

Her "Palestine" is an example of a polyrhythmic poem admirable in every particular—music, restrained artistry in word usage, and the broadening emotional appeal at the end:

Old plant of Asia—
Mutilated vine
Holding earth's leaping sap
In every stem and shoot
That, lopped off, sprouts again—
Why should you seek a plateau walled about,
Whose garden is the world?

"Debris" is as effective, and tragically true:

I love those spirits
That men stand off and point at,

Or shudder and hood up their souls—
Those ruined ones
Where Liberty has lodged an hour
And passed like flame,
Bursting asunder the too small house.

"Reveille," in her volume *Sun Up,* opens on a high note:

Come forth, you workers!
Let the fires go cold—
Let the iron spill out, out of the troughs—
Let the iron run wild
Like a red bramble on the floors—
Leave the mill and the foundry and the mine. . . .

It is not yet light
But I beat upon your doors.
You say you await the Dawn
But I say you are the Dawn.
Come, in your irresistible unspent force
And make new light upon the mountains.

"Irresistible unspent force" sags back into eloquence; but the last line returns to poetry.

Samuel Roth is one of the most brilliant of the young shoots of the old plant of Asia, although so far he lacks some element needful to entitle him to eminence. His *Europe: A Book for America* is a powerful product, as depressing as Robinson. It must not be forgotten that gusty optimism may be the veriest whistling in the dreadful light. After a sharp etching of the nations of Europe, he proceeds:

So you have gathered together at another Peace Table
Saying that you have made Peace?
But is not this Peace Treaty of yours a declaration of war,
A scribbled paper whirled mournfully along by the night
winds of anarchy which sweep the world?

Has France made Peace with Germany?
England with Egypt, India, Canada and Australia?
Italy with Jugo-Slavia?
Germany with Poland?
Poland with the Ukraine?
America with England?
Europe with her dead?

This was published early in 1919. He continues—

When the talons of the gray hawk in the north sea are broken;
When the wild boar of the East is crushed and the bees may build their honeycomb in his husk;
When the backyard of the continent is cleared and swept;
When the hunter puts up his rifle and buries his contempt;
There will be peace in Europe,
The profound, undisturbed peace of the dead.

This is his more cheerful vein. He treats of people next, concluding:

But don't worry;
When women will have entirely lost their luster
They will grow the bigger, milkier breasts for the feeding of greedy sucklings,
And when men will have finally lowered their heads
Their toes will spread out, their backbones will broaden;
Only
There will be no one to milk or ride the silly beasts.

In his epilog he leaves his cool vision and burns with the vindictive fire of the oppressed Jew. His words sear like acid as he describes the pogroms, the horrors inflicted by the *goyim*, while the Jewish God stood by, all powerless. The God admits his fault, and prophesies a joint retribution:

For that they sneered at your youth
And mocked your manhood,
I will smite them; . . .

And because of the shame that they heaped on you, my beloved,
I will ascend once more on high, I will ascend once more on high,
And out of the sun will I snatch the fire-fury for power;
And out of the clouds will I suck the thunder for power;
And out of the lightning will I wrest the swiftness for power;
And I will raise up my arms once more
And they will yet know that I am the Lord!

The old strain of Amos, of Hosea; the tune heard in Adah Isaacs Menken—familiar, and eternally fresh.

Louis Untermeyer is another whose lines possess at times distinct social passion. "Caliban in the Coal Mines" is a vigorous protest:

God, we don't like to complain;
We know that the mine is no lark—
But—there's the pools from the rain;
But—there's the cold and the dark.

God, you don't know what it is—
You, in Your well-lighted sky,
Watching the meteors whizz;
Warm, with the sun always by.

God, if You had but the moon
Stuck in Your cap for a lamp,
Even You'd tire of it soon,
Down in the dark and the damp.

Nothing but blackness above,
And nothing that moves but the cars—
God, if You wish for our love,
Fling us a handful of stars!

His "Lines to a Pomeranian Puppy Valued at 3,500 Dollars" contains clever satire:

Wrapt in soft and costly furs,
All sewed up with careful stitches,
You consort with proper curs
And with perfumed bitches. . . .

You don't sweat to struggle free,
Work in rags and rotting breeches.—
Puppy, have a laugh at me,
Digging in the ditches.

"Portrait of an American" and similar pieces sustain his vigorous objection to the great god Sham. Many of his love lyrics are reminiscent of Heine, but at times his own music speaks clearly:

Never will you let me
Tire of leaping passion;
Never can I grow weary
Of undesired joys.

The delicate strength of your bosom,
Your hands' incredible softness;
The fluent curve of your body;
The fierceness of your lips;

Ceaselessly do they call me—
You and your eloquent beauty
Are challenge and invitation
Too ravishing to resist.

Always the burning summons,
The sweet, imperative madness,
Rides over me, like a conqueror,
Careless and confident. . . .

Even so goes love,
Trampling and invincible,
With rapt and pitiless beauty,
Rough-shod over the world!

Jean Starr Untermeyer, wife of the last-named poet, says:

I have left no songs for an idle lute,
No pretty tunes of coddled ills,
But the bare chart of my growing pains.

She does herself wrong in this inventory; "High Tide" indicates the possession of a rich astringent music:

I edged back against the night.
The sea growled assault on the wave-bitten shore.
And the breakers,
Like young and impatient hounds,
Sprang with rough joy on the shrinking sand.
Sprang—but were drawn back slowly,
With a long, relentless pull,
Whimpering, into the dark.

Then I saw who held them captive:
And I saw how they were bound,
With a broad and quivering leash of light
Held by the moon,
As, calm and unsmiling,
She walked the deep fields of the sky.

Her second volume does not attain this height, except in isolated flashes like:

Knowledge can never be an end designed
But lies in searching.

and one unforgettable couplet, in the Eve poem:

> The deed is done and is not done;
> The fruit is tasted, the search begun.

Robert L. Wolfe, whose fine critical sonnet was quoted in the chapter granted the Bedlam bards, has a more authentic racial note than either of these poets, and a singing skill coupled to a freer gesture. His "Little Lessons in Historic Determinism" is a memorable thing:

> A Jew, with nostrils curved like those we know,
> And curious smooth wax-like sallow skin,
> Collided, nineteen centuries ago,
> With everything the world found merit in.
> The Jew was killed at thirty-odd. The world
> Bragged of this fact with some complacency—
> Resisted . . . questioned—feared—surrendered—curled
> In abject awe beneath his gallows tree.
>
> The leaven stales. Another lump of yeast
> Is hence to be injected in this dough. . . .
> Just when you covet comfort most, the east
> Showers these stars again like gusts of snow—
> And level once again, and trampled, must
> A Jew lay waste your Temple in the dust.

A vision no less keen speaks in the polished verses of Mildred Cummer Wood, as in "Our Lady of Sorrows":

> From a huddle of rotting shacks
> The delicate church spire
> Pokes a derisive finger
> Into the eye of the Lord.

Her "Prophet's Honor" gains added interest from the fact that her family is related to that of the great singer of Paumanok:

"That worthless Walt—"
The hard-drudging home folks called him
On prim Sunday afternoons.
"He'll never save a cent—"
"He never has a cent—"
"He'll never make a cent—"
The meager comments ran.
They hitched in thrifty judgment,
On the slippery haircloth walnut chairs,
Questioning with tight-lipped interest
A visiting relative from down Camden way.
"Driving the village stage now, is he?
And idle all the winter past? . . .
Well, every family has its ne'er-do-well—
But driving a bus . . .
And he a Whitman, too!"

Years after . . .
Another rigid Sunday afternoon—
The men's knotted fingers
Are clasped uncomfortably
On stiffened knees, blighted and warped.
They bashfully inspect the wedding clothes
Of young Sam and his city bride.
In her satin ruffles, she perches on the horsehair sofa
Like a spring bird on an ice-glazed fence-rail
In freezing rain.
"Oh, yes," she laughed, "we went down to Camden
To see Cousin Walt Whitman.
He has written a book—poetry some call it;
At any rate, he's very famous.
The newspapers tell about him, even in London,
And everywhere the noted people write
And go on pilgrimages to his small house."
"He worked at it for years, you say?"
A close-mouthed great-aunt spoke. . . .
"Well, none of us would waste a life
To write a book.
How much did he get for it?"

With hard fingers, she flattened a crumpled tidy;
"No," she opened incredulous eyes,
"He didn't expect to be paid?"
Her penny-saving twang rose in outraged disgust:
"That worthless Walt!"

James Oppenheim, in 1914, was one of the promising half dozen among the new poets; but the promise has thinned cumulatively with each succeeding volume. Prior to the chief collection, *Monday Morning* (1909) saw him a keen observer, in this stanza form which he made his own:

Morose gray Monday morning again, and baleful business again,
And the ride from Yorkville to Chatham Square, jammed with women and men
In the cylinder car with its thumping wheels, and the moody, sad, seared faces
Buried in morning papers, and squalid as smoke- and time-soiled laces.

He was cabined, cribbed, confined in this; *Songs for the New Age* discovered his true music, at times bitterly epigrammatic:

Let nothing bind you:
If it is Duty, away with it.
If it is Law, disobey it.
If it is Opinion, go against it.

There is only one Divinity: Yourself.
Only one God: You.

now with a golden melody:

Now on my soul's imperious surge
Taking the risk, as of death, and in deepening twilight,

I ride on the darkening flood and go out on the waters
Till over the tide comes music, till over the tide the breath
Of the song of my far-off soul is wafted and blown,
Murmuring commandments.

The height of his singing here was "We Unborn," with its exquisite opening:

I awake:
Midnight, star-shouldered, is leaning over me.

I must to my desk, and light the lamp, and stare at the flesh
of my hands and legs;
Marveling to breathe and be alive.

I open the window: I lean out in the dark.
Stars! shall you answer my cry tonight?
Earth! shall you turn to the call of your son?

He ends on the note that he is the unborn, moving toward the birth hour. In this first book psychoanalysis was the brooding overtone; it gradually usurped the rôle of the favorite theme. "Creation," in *The Book of Self,* has music as exquisite:

Who buried Atlantis
And devoured Egypt?
Into what jaws has Athens gone?
Galley-slave and Agamemnon, the great king, are shovelled
under,
And the girl that combed the hair of Helen is dust with her
golden mistress.

But the whole reads somewhat like the rough draft of a drama, rather than the product. "The Solitary," which came next, indicated a technique corrupted by the illogical ejaculatory line-division of the Imagists and the "Others"

group. The self speaks on and on, in soggy monotony, with beauty in increasing infrequency. "The Mystic Warrior" (again the poet's self) contains truth which might well be unmentioned:

> I lie in bed. . . .
> . . . A great carbuncle on my forehead.

It is "an extraordinary, disjointed novel in free verse," to use the words of one of its admirers. It is extraordinary, but not interesting, not wholly sincere, and a further regression in the career of an artist who began by marveling at the outer and the inner wonder of life, and has traveled down a psychoanalytic pathway until his final care is to keep uniform the temperature of the hot-water bottles packed around his hypochondriac libido, as psychoanalysts call the inner urge of life.

The author states that in *The Golden Bird,* his latest work, "free verse comes to its true musical expression." "If I had to make a choice," he continues, "I would pick it out as the one book which I want to leave to the future." Unfortunately for his critical reputation, the book does not deserve this unalloyed enthusiasm. It is compounded of love songs:

> Spell of Apollo brightens and burns my spirit. . . .
> O my soul, opening in the sunrise that is Greece,
> Gone home singing to the star of beauty.

The first line of this is encouraging, if true; the second ancient and reminiscent, the third worse. Much of it is incoherent and affected:

> I call you: 'Nausicaa' . . . .
> I call and call you in the sunrise: 'Nausicaa' . . . .

The sea's blue is in my eyes,
And in my ears the song of the white nymphs: something
about dark Helen,
Something about dark Helen. . . .

The future will hardly cherish this; or the mildly amusing "Hebrews" (*"to be chanted thunderously"*):

I come of a mighty race. . . . I come of a very mighty
race. . . .
Adam was a mighty man, and Noah a captain of the moving
waters,
Moses was a stern and splendid king, yea, so was Moses. . . .
Give me more songs like David's, to shake my throat to the
pit of my belly,
And let me roll in the Isaiah thunder.

This sounds like a poor parody of his own work, an amateur impromptu in Hebrew rhythms. All the splendor of Samuel Roth's conclusion is gone here. The last part of the slight book is the summing up of his psychoanalytic divagations:

I lived with the Great Mother for seven long years. . . .
I searched her womb and consumed her everlasting body. . . .
I rode her, my white mare, down the roads of dreams. . . .

What did the ancient one say?
I became a stallion, she became a mare,
I became a bull, she became a cow,
I became a nymph, she a god,
I the adored Virgin, she my Son,
I was a Serpent, and she a maiden,
I the Devil, she my concubine.

This amazing sketch, which might be shaped into a nursery rhyme, with certain substitutions, but is neither

illuminating nor poetry, leads to a decision that she is conquered by his cleavage from her. In this poem appears a mildly meditative variant of one of the new conventions, as vicious as the old one assuming that any verse was poetry which spoke of *amaranth* and *asphodel,* of *welkin* and *shoon* and *porphyrogene lusts.* The new convention, into which Sandburg, Masters, and other notable figures also fall, is that any verse is modern poetry which talks of *womb, belly, guts,* and the like. Poetry may use the first, as the second; but neither makes poetry. If we compare the thin and at times exiled music of this free verse with Whitman, with Miss Menken, with Sandburg, with the earlier Oppenheim, we see how indiscriminatingly immodest the author has become. It is "We Dead," "We Unborn," and their fine kindred, that will live: not this sparse aftermath.

The bulk of his post-1914 poetry has been collected in a long volume, "The Sea," which permits a comprehensive survey of his achievement and his limitations. The various poems are framed within an extended *Mystic Warrior,* in a scheme almost as artificial as Frost's whatnot *New Hampshire.* In spite of the modern modesty of his announcement that his poetry holds "the unheard song whose prelude is in Whitman and Nietzsche," there is little in them to indicate kinship to the Whitmanwort. The two final poems reveal what he has failed to do strikingly. He has dipped into all the vats of life, he says, "Because I must sing this life for the future of the human race": a few lines later his singing takes the form of "New times demand new men." Lowell at least added new measures: and Lowell is a small original. The final word is.

> And young gods, never seen before, laugh to the dance and laughter of Man.

And yet we do not demand new pterodactyls, or, more accurately, new basilisks. If Mr. Oppenheim could recover some of the shaped sincerity of "We Unborn," and abandon for a time devoting himself to his carbuncles and his hysteria, he might achieve rank as a poet. As it is, he remains in form a heart-break Whitman, to use Lanier's phrase; and, in substance, an uncertain addendum to Jung and Freud.

One of the important figures among the singers from the depths is Arthur Giovanitti, with a poetic name resting upon one thin "Arrows in the Gale." He is not a finished craftsman; he is an authentic voice of the actual revolutionary movement. He is neither delicate nor gentle, as "The Prisoner's Bench" shows.

> And now we, too, must sit here, Joe. Don't dust
> These boards on which our wretched brothers fell.
> They are clean, there's no reason for disgust.
> For the fat millionaire's revolting stench
> Is not here, nor the preacher's saintly smell,
> And the judge never sat upon this bench.

This grew out of his imprisonment during the textile strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts. His two great chants, "The Walker" and "The Cage," have a long brooding melody:

> I hear footsteps over my head all night.
> They come and they go. Again they come and they go all night,
> They come one eternity in four paces and they go one eternity in four paces, and between the coming and the going there is Silence and the Night and the Infinite.
> One-two-three-four: four paces and the wall.
> One-two-three-four: four paces and the iron gate.

He has measured his space, he has measured it accurately, scrupulously, minutely, as the hangman measures the rope and the grave-digger the coffin—so many feet, so many inches, so many fractions of an inch for each of the four paces.

One-two-three-four. Each step sounds heavy and hollow over my head, and the echo of each step sounds hollow within my head as I count them in suspense and in dread that once, perhaps, in the endless walk, there may be five steps instead of four between the yellow brick wall and the red iron gate.

There is a persuasive theory that the line length marks physiologically the breath of the poet. Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes first expressed this, suggesting that the rolling Greek hexameters indicated a full-breasted warrior as the singer, while the short rhythms of children's verse showed a shorter flowing of breath. Arthur Guiterman carries this a step further, suggesting that the distinct break in Anglo-Saxon verse indicates that the shorter-breathing bard has taken the place of the warrior here; and, perhaps facetiously, shows instances in which the staccato brevity pointed to a shouted phrase punctuating the wassail cheers of the rejoicing warriors. The astringent shortness of many of the lines of H. D. and other modern poets may indicate a physiological fact. No matter what weight may be attached to this theory, one thing is sure: that the soundest technique in polyrhythmic poetry, cadenced verse, free verse, or whatever you choose to call it, is to end the line at the point where the breath is ordinarily renewed. The end-stop line in formal verse (as iambic pentameter, or heroic blank verse) is a blemish, because it makes for monotony; there is no danger of this in polyrhythmic verse. This is the more successful technique of Whitman and the better practi-

tioners of this broader gesture newly popularized in poetry. On this point Giovanitti carries his line lengths to extremes. The music is sustained, but the logical line division is absent. This trait, of course, does not mar the innate music.

"The Republic" indicates his vigor in meter:

Against the castle wall the picks
She raised and planted there her flags,
Against the ermine hurled the rags,
The torch against the crucifix. . . .

And when upon the great sunrise
Flew her dishevelled victories,
To all the lands, on all the seas,
Like angry eagles in the skies,

To ring the call of brotherhood
And hail mankind from shore to shore,
Wrapped in her splendid tricolor
The People's virgin bride she stood.

. . . . .

This was the dawn. But when the day
Wore out with all its festive songs,
And all the hearts, and all the tongues,
Were stilled in wonder and dismay,—

When night with velvet-sandaled feet
Stole in her chamber's solitude,
Behold! she lay there naked, lewd,
A drunken harlot of the street,

With withered breasts and shaggy hair
Soiled by each wanton, frothy kiss,
Between a sergeant of police
And a decrepit millionaire.

Despite this despair, he can sing:

> And yet, how loud, like the sea's surging roar,
> I hear the sunward march of countless feet.

The bitter "The Sermon on the Common" contains its nuggets of golden fire:

> Therefore, say not unto yourselves, even as the priests and scribes and doctors of the law and fools and hypocrites say, This is the goal which was destined unto us and no further shall we go. . . .
> For your feet are like the unrolling of the endless scrolls of time—not even night and silence and death can stop their march forward and upward, ever to a farther and loftier goal.
> And, lo, ye shall never arrive because never shall ye cease going.

Another poet elaborated this idea:

> It is only the striving that counts,
> Only the struggle that toughens the sinews of body and soul. . . .
>
> So strip the ornaments from your neck, and on to the fight,
> Steadily aim for the gleaming goal;
> And when you have reached it, and hold in your hand the prize,
> Toss it lightly aside, a bauble, a plaything for children,
> And on to the next race, the new-opening struggle.

It is apparent that the majority of these singers are not of the native stock. The reason is ground for neither reproach nor commendation: it is one of the cumulative facts of our history. The older immigrants to America, from the cavaliers at Jamestown and the Separatists at

Plymouth through the next two centuries, suffer from the same denial of "mishpat"—justice—which sings so vehemently in these late comers. The level plain of their pioneer equality has been riven and uptilted into a high narrow peak of worldly success, a steep declivity of lessening prosperity, a wide chasm of failure; but the process has been so gradual, that these older immigrants have not experienced the sudden spiritual wrench which tortures shrieking song out of the punished human. The more recent comers arrived with a great light of liberty beating upon their eyes. They found a world at times less kind than the old, and never up to their gilded visions. They beheld the peak and the prosperity; they filled largely the chasm: the abrupt disillusionment has wrung out the song. It must never be forgotten that it is no new song, no new evil: it was old when the pyramids were unthought of, and there are those who see it young when the last monument of cultures young with us has crumbled into the silent dust.

There will be those who feel no sympathy, and only a bitter indignation, at the inclusion of these embittered voices; who see no justification for the complaint, no evil in the fate. "All's right with the world" is an easy song for the few havened in the floating ark; it is dreadful mockery to the many battling the swirling waters. There are, of course, those who would groan in a garden of freedom; just as there are those who find Paradise only in chains. But it remains that the violent song has been heard in every age, and that it is no quieter today. There is truth existing and desired in:

Lovelier grows the earth, as the radiant ages pass;
Nobler the forms upon it, and their fair dwellings;
Sweeter the tune that it sings as it wheels thru the embracing ether.

It is a truth that desiccates into falsehood, if the watchers at the temple slumber, and the guardians of the shrine falter. There is still need for the other cry:

> Who will be the axes, the torches in darkness,
> The stabbing steel to end oppression?

Those who feel no sympathy with this will not gain by denying that it exists; they are the stronger in their content for knowing what discords break the music. They are few indeed who will not echo in their heart of hearts, Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

CHAPTER XXI

Poets to Come

We have come to the inevitable period in this survey of the American domestication of English poetry. This threefold singing has had some six centuries of flowering in the mother land; it has been less than a hundred years since the appearance of the youthful *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Other Poems* on this side. In our singing today, earlier European and Asian strains pay their slight toll, native Indian verse and the home-blossoming Negro song contribute their large influence. The American product is a thing to be proud of. Consider the lyric map of the country. New England has given us the early group, Emily Dickinson, Robinson, Frost; New York, the dragnet of the East, Bryant and the literati, Whitman, Wheelock, Rose O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, and many others; the South has furnished Poe, Lanier, Adah Isaacs Menken, and several lesser recent singers; the awakening Middle West has spoken its word in Lindsay, Sandburg, and Masters. Only the Far West is backward, with C. E. S. Wood, Joaquin Miller, and George Sterling as its chief contributions to date. The land is speaking today in these and other voices: it is worth considering the present tendencies in this speech.

It is an easy indictment that America lacks culture, and that native artists must seek appreciation abroad. This was true of Poe, Whitman, Frost. Recently we

have lost such preciosities as Pound, Eliot, and H. D. by this translation; in return, we have imported Lola Ridge, Arturo Giovanitti, Padraic Colum, and have won from recent immigrant stock Carl Sandburg. The indictment is easy: and it is a withering half-truth. There are poetry societies mushrooming in every Gopher Prairie and Zenith City in the land; but a poet starves on a diet of mere hand-clapping. What more do we pay over the counter for the songs of the authentic singer, dragged reluctantly to "the trial by market everything must come to"? A trial by market is a test of the purchaser, as well as the producer and his product. Measured against the income from magazine publication and volume royalty of even the leading ten of our poets, a street-cleaner is a financial aristocrat. Street cleaning has its white-winged virtues; but a Shakespeare in ability in the D. S. C. gives no such actual longevity to a town as the humblest James Byron Elmore or J. Gordon Coogler.

If a land seeks the limited immortality of men's memories, this is achieved primarily through the land's art. The tall Hittite empire once lay like a red shawl from the Halys to the Gulf of Akabah; it is today a few sentences in the most comprehensive chronicles, for it left no art. Old Sparta was an iron wound, young Sparta a dim torch, in Grecian tales; and that is all: their triumphs were of the body, and not of the soul, whose speech is art. What art was in Carthage was sponged clean by the red-handed conquerors; it is today at best a hollow remembrance. Pyramided Egypt, the hunting cavalcade of Nineveh, the humility and singing wrath of Israel, the skysong in speech and marble of Greece, the shattering glitter of Rome, Provençal and Florence on the road between the Inferno and Paradise, India and the Hills of Han, these are not forgotten; the gay way to Canter-

bury, Elizabeth's London, Weimar, Skein, Paumanok, these are remembered; these are bone and sinew of that dream of a fairer earth which is man's clearest reason for living on. We do not take pride in statistics of the annual production of grain and metalware in Lesbos; we recall that Sappho sang there. This is not a plea that our bank presidents, corporation directors, plumbers, steam-fitters, clerks, at once resign their work and assail the epic or the sonnet: it is a reminder that their work is like the grass which groweth up, and flourisheth, and is cut down, and withereth; while a longer life awaits the able practitioners of our craft.

Shall we say that a man must pay for electing the unfading laurel by living in want, and dying in poverty? That is the decree now. If the poet has an outside aptitude—whether it be hack-writing, teaching, law; or if he is wealthy enough to afford the costly luxury of the leisure needed for song—in either case we let him live. If not, there is always the misery of Poe, the paralysis of Whitman, the penury of many who might be listed. This is the problem: the remedy is to be groped toward. The "vagabond wage," whether an endowment by a college (with some provision that every recipient need not be of the amaranth-asphodel fraternity), or some kindlier substitute, is a step in the right direction.

Gentlemen of trade—for it is you, after all, who hold the reins of any land; who set the pitch for its thinking and its conduct—you have scorned poetry, and scourged the poets. Poetry, despite your rack, will outlast you, and be your sole mirror in days to come. And poetry, scourged by you, not unreasonably has condemned you. Perhaps none of the mounting indictments are justified; perhaps all are. We have no rosy view of the rulers of other days from their singers. There will be

a change, if you make it. The poet asks two little favors: a fit reception for himself, a living part in your scheme of society—and that you can easily give; and justice and joy to all men—and that you may find less of a trifle. But the reward, a limited immortality wrought of gold, not written on asbestos, may be worth it. If you take the road less traveled by, the road of justice and righteousness, that will make all the difference.

We need a more capable criticism, men and women of the pen and the typewriter. The critic owes certain debts which he can not postpone forever. It is not enough to pass chamber judgment for or against the poet: this is the least of the functions, and is after all more a mirror of the critic than of the poet. The breed of office-boys and sports writers as literary critics has certain advantages: but they should at least be supplemented by men who do not mistake Whitman for a recent governor of New York, and Homer for the object of baseball. The little adulation groups, the mutual log-rollers, the reciprocating back-scratchers are perhaps an inevitable blight: at least they furnish the hound of heaven with an incentive to scratch.

There is a delicacy which prevents much adequate criticism of contemporary art; and this is harmful. Truth-telling is always costly; but unless we breed men and women willing to pay its price, we might as well shut up shop. "The strong men keep coming on," as Sandburg phrased the hope. This restraint applies especially to poets as critics; yet Symons' word must not be forgotten:

> The only quite essential criticism has been done by creative writers, for the most part poets. The criticism of a philosopher, Aristotle's, comes next to that of the poets,

but it is never that winged thing which criticism, as well as poetry, can be in the hands of a poet.

Astute old John Dryden worded it,

> Poets themselves are the most proper, though, I conclude, not the only critics.

Baudelaire gave his decree with his usual penetration:

> It would be a wholly new event in the history of the arts if a critic were to turn himself into a poet, a reversal of every psychic law, a monstrosity; on the other hand, all great poets become naturally, inevitably, critics. I pity the poets who are guided solely by instinct; they seem to me incomplete. In the spiritual life of the former there must come a crisis when they would think out their art, discover the obscure laws in consequence of which they have produced, and draw from this study a series of precepts whose divine purpose is infallibility in poetic production. It would be impossible for a critic to become a poet, and it is impossible for a poet not to contain a critic.

Under the present dispensation, poets wear an oversensitive attire, live under a desperate roof, which makes it hard for them to assume a function which needs its calm and cool, as well as its rapture, its sturdy indignation. Yet they must not fail here. The critic at worst is a boll-weevil; at best, he is a kindly blend of publicity man and pedagog. By pedagog I mean that he must be a part creator of the life of the existing poem, and of the very being of the future poem; his rôle is that of a vicarious Shakespeare.

In its essence, criticism is as solitary as creation. Others may laud the critical product, and their criticism in its turn may alter the original verdict; but the altera-

tion again is an inner solitary activity. Criticism, as Symons says, is a valuation of forces, and is indifferent to their direction. Its aim, he continues, is to distinguish what is essential in the work of a writer: to do this it must interpret, share publicly the poet's aim, let his ware be sampled. It concerns itself with the root principles of human nature, with fundamental ideas. It will naturally reveal the deepest philosophy of the critic throughout, if it is to be more than verbal ping-pong; and it calls for all the clarity that the writer can command. To paraphrase Paul Elmore More's judgment on another poet, it must stand entirely aloof from the currents of the hour, judging men and things from the larger circles of time; it must be emancipated, as far as humanly possible, from the illusions of the present. There are two greatnesses, the creative, and the appreciative: the critic needs both.

> What, then, it may be asked, is the good of being great? The answer is that you may understand greatness better in others, whether alive or dead, and choose better company from these and enjoy and understand that company better when you have chosen it.

So Samuel Butler; and it will follow, as he says, that you will thus give pleasure to those whom, in no casual sense, he calls the best people; and will live in the lives of those who are yet unborn. In his own way, every man must be a critic; manhood consists of this, and the consequent activity. But in an age forced by its multiplexity into specialization, there must be those whose especial function is sustained criticism; and these are their road guides.

To have great poets, Whitman said, we need great audiences too. To have great art, great government,

great life, we need great audiences—and the audiences always in their ways critics and creators. The intelligence of the average American, according to learned psychologists, is less than that of a fourteen year-old boy. With equal truth the figures may be reversed: so precocious is the American boy of fourteen, that he has then reached the intelligence of a matured average man. He does not care much for poetry, this precocious boy, this average man; beyond Eddie Guest, Walt Mason, and Robert W. Service he does not often go. The fault is not entirely his: what has he in common with amaranth and asphodel? If the poets talk straight to him, he listens. Lindsay, Sandburg, have proved this. If the poetry is in contact with his life, he will listen to it. If his life is tied on to poetry—to minted beauty, to packed tendencies toward truth—both will gain from the contact. We fail as a nation, unless we strive for and achieve a lifting of the level of the average man. Little as our statesmen appear to realize it, this is more their duty than the most protective tariff, the most efficient budget of expenditures. The average man has all latent possibilities; he lacks the soil for the growth of the higher ones, the soil called contemplation. He must loaf, to invite his soul. If we can establish the custom of contemplation, of meditation, the rest will follow. Till man has leisure, there is no true manhood. Leisure can produce utter waste; it can produce an *Origin of Man,* a Hamlet. We will have audiences, when we give them a worthy song; we will have great audiences, when we make them great.

To the poets, little need be said that has not already been emphasized in the various chapters. One negative must be remembered: poetry is not pure music. Poetry appeals in part to the intellect: it directs the images in the mind, causing at least an initial unity in the images

evoked. Thereafter they may wander; but they stray from some central locality, deliberately fashioned by the poet. With music, all this is changed. Music appeals largely to the emotions, quickening the tempo of life, deepening the sensation of living. This flood of feeling, with some, remains a flowing welter; luckier ones are sent voyaging toward images thronging with pervasive clarity. These images are of the things desired in life, and forbidden—the sweet raptures desired and buried in each of us. These images are all of heaven we are sure of; "Heaven's but the vision of fulfilled desire." Music leads readily into this land—a land only the fortunate few of us tread with actual feet. Poetry is otherwise: it is music wedded to speech; it is song. Lanier's identification of music and verse as differing only in the limited scale in the former, and the latter's use of every tone perceptible by the ear, errs here. The musical instrument of speech has the differentiating consonantal sounds, which he does not stress. His analysis of verse fails in overlooking the distinction between words and the sliding musical sounds he deems words to be. And poetry is not merely words arranged in pleasing sounds; it is words with pleasing sounds which make a definite appeal to the intellect, as well as the emotions. The poet who overlooks this writes nonsense, compared to which the least directed jingle in Mother Goose holds the deep wisdom of Aristotle.

Poetry today at its best does not forget the beauty of the discord, the broadening song possible with increasing complexity of rhythm, whether as vital ornament to formal verse, or as the all of polyrhythmic verse. At the same time, it stops short of the innate complexity of prose rhythms; the undertone of rhythmic unity is never absent. Poetry speaks a living speech, neither too slimed with the gutter nor too frigid with the obsolete. Poetry

has no limitation of theme, always remembering that the tabooed or the discredited subject limits the audience. Its range is from the earliest lifeless seed of the earliest man to the last wandering dust of his last son: from the first chaos to the last chaos: but its organic living heart, to our poets, is the America they have known and know. It is the singing incarnation of man's stretch toward two intangible goals of reality, beauty and truth: two that are one: two that are all.

Poetry is interpreter of the past, mirror of the present, parent and midwife of the future. It can hardly find higher text than the words of the noblest American book of psalms:

O days of the future I believe in you—I isolate myself for your sake,
O America, because you build for mankind I build for you, . . .
Lead the present with friendly hand toward the future.

INDEX

INDEX

Abercrombie, Lascelles, 145
Adams, Francis, 348
Aeschylus, 140
Aiken, Conrad, 199, 294, 295, 307, 310, 312
Alcaeus, 347
Aldington, Richard, 311
Amos, 346, 359
Anderson, Maxwell, 343
Anonymous, 6, 313
Anglo-Saxon Influence, 2–12, and elsewhere
Arensburg, Walter Conrad, 302
Aristophanes, 347
Arnold, Matthew, 5, 97
Audience for Poetry, 380, 381
Austin, Mary, 97, 99, 100, 101

Baker, Karle Wilson, 335
Baudelaire, Charles Pierre, 379
Bay Psalm Book, 7, 179
Beer, Morris Abel, 344
Benet, Stephen Vincent, 318, 319
Benet, William Rose, 262, 318
Beowulf, 2, 6, 14, 261
Blake, William, 5, 46, 116, 276, 279, 312
Bodenheim, Maxwell, 299–302; also 199, 296, 306, 307, 311, 312
Bogan, Louise, 329, 330
Book of Job, 44, 95, 140
Bradford, Gamaliel, 80, 331, 332
Bradstreet, Anne, 7
Braithwaite, William Stanley, 109
Braley, Berton, 343
Branch, Anna Hempstead, 117
Brawley, Benjamin, 111
Brooke, Rupert, 92
Brooks, Van Wyck, 8, 182
Brown, Robert Carlton, 303
Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 348
Browning, Robert, 5, 9, 42, 69, 176, 273, 348
Bryant, William Cullen, 11, 25, 34, 35, 375
Burgess, Gellett, 349
Burlin, Natalie Curtis, 97
Burns, Robert, 5, 69, 98, 148, 231, 248, 348
Butler, Samuel, 29, 43, 56, 380
Bynner, Witter, 319, 320
Byron, Lord (George Gordon Byron), 5, 9, 26, 68, 69, 97, 146

Campion, Thomas, 4, 204, 275, 276
Cannell, Skipwith, 303
Carman, Bliss, 112
Carmichael, Waverly Turner, 111
Carpenter, Edward, 117
Carpenter, George R., 46, 47
Carter, Rev. Nicholas, 229, 230
Cawein, Madison, 117
Celtic Epics, 2
Celtic Influence, 2–12, and elsewhere
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 3, 8, 9, 69, 248
Chesterton, Gilbert Keith, 5, 12, 13, 20, 79, 95, 119, 141, 150, 222, 235, 312, 319, 348

Chivers, Thomas Holley, 26–28
Cibber, Colley, 163
Cleghorn, Sarah N., 352
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 5, 13, 16, 20, 25, 26, 68, 69, 73, 116, 228, 312, 348
Collins, William, 4
Colum, Padraic, 376
Conkling, Grace Hazard, 326
Conkling, Hilda, 326
Coogler, J. Gordon, 376
Cooke, Philip Pendleton, 8
Cotter, Joseph S., 111
Cotter, Joseph S., Jr., 111
Cowper, William, 4
Crabbe, George, 124, 248
Crane, Dr. Frank, 178
Crane, Stephen, 111, 112, 348
Crapsey, Adelaide, 117, 118
Crashaw, Richard, 301
Criticism, 378–380
Cromwell, Gladys, 344
Cronyn, George W., 97
Cullen, Countee P., 111
Cummings, E. E., 199, 304, 305, 306
Curran, Edwin, 343

Dalton, Power, 343
Dandridge, Roy C., 111
Dante, Alighieri, 71, 140, 312
Dargan, Olive Tilford, 337
Davies, Mary Carolyn, 326, 327
Davies, W. H., 5, 89
Davis, Daniel Webster, 111
de Casseres, Benjamin, 296, 297
de la Mare, Walter, 5, 161, 283, 312
Deutsch, Babbette, 332
De Witt, Samuel A., 353, 354
Dickinson, Emily, 82–96; also 12, 375
Dobson, Austin, 248
Donne, John, 4
Doolittle, Helen (H. D.), 199, 216, 292, 293, 370, 376
Drake, Joseph Rodman, 11
Dryden, John, 4, 12, 20, 127, 163, 379
Dunbar, Alice Moore Nelson, 111
Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 106

Eastman, Max, 353
Ecclesiastes, 186
Eliot, T. S., 307–10; also 199, 261, 267, 268, 273, 312, 376
Elmore, James Byron, 376
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 9–11, 30, 35, 37
English, Thomas Dunn, 31
Euripides, 140, 347
Eusden, Laurence, 163
Evans, Donald, 295
Evans, Florence Wilkinson, 352

Farrar, John, 343
Fauset, Jessie, 111
Ficke, Arthur Davison, 328, 329
Field, Eugene, 117
Fletcher, John, 4, 314
Fletcher, John Gould, 199, 216, 293, 294, 311
Ford, John, 4, 314
Fort, Paul, 225
Frank, Florence Kiper, 343
Frost, Robert, 142–162; also 12, 69, 124, 134, 167, 181, 198, 199, 216, 222, 224, 248, 254, 261, 273, 312, 348, 368, 375

Gibson, Wilfrid Wilson, 5, 145, 348
Gilman, Charlotte Perkins, 114, 115, 348
Giovanitti, Arturo, 369–372; also 66, 376
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 140, 182

Gray, Thomas, 4, 50, 51, 116, 167
Gheek Anthology, 165
Greeley, Horace, 19
Griffith, William, 336
Griswold, Rufus W., 19
Groff, Alice, 303
Guest, Edgar Albert, 381
Guiney, Louise Imogen, 117
Guiterman, Arthur, 173, 174, 343, 370

Hall, Amanda Benjamin, 339
Hall, Hazel, 340
Halleck, Fitz-Greene, 11
Hardy, Thomas, 5, 186, 312, 331
Harte, Bret, 117
Hay, John, 117
H. D., *see* Doolittle, Helen
Hebrew Prophets, 346, 347
Heine, Heinrich, 65, 140, 182, 332, 360
Henley, William Ernest, 182
Herford, Oliver, 338
Herrick, Robert, 4, 276
Hill, Leslie Pinckney, 111
Hodgson, Ralph, 5, 348
Holloway, James Wesley, 107
Holmes, Oliver Wendell, 11, 370
Homer, 9, 140, 246, 280, 311, 312, 378
Hood, Thomas, 348
Hosea, 346, 359
Housman, A. E., 5, 11, 14, 163, 190, 213, 289, 312
Hovey, Richard, 112

Imagism, 216, 291–294
Indian Poetry, 97–102
Isaiah, 347

Jamison, Roscoe C., 111
Jennings, Leslie Nelson, 343
Johns, Orrick, 303, 344
Johnson, Charles Bertram, 111
Johnson, Fenton, 107, 108
Johnson, Georgia Douglas, 109
Johnson, James Weldon, 105, 107, 109, 110
Jones, Ernest, 348
Jones, Howard Mumford, 342, 343
Jonson, Ben, 4, 163, 314
Josephson, Matthew, 304
Joyce, James, 214, 306

Keats, John, 5, 9, 14, 25, 65, 71, 146, 170
Kemp, Harry, 333
Kenyon, Bernice Lesbia, 321, 322
Kilmer, Joyce, 242, 344
Kipling, Rudyard, 348
Kreymborg, Alfred, 98, 199, 295, 298, 299, 303, 306, 311, 312

Langland, William, 3, 8, 348
Lanier, Sidney, 68–81; also 9, 12, 14, 94, 97, 146, 181, 188, 193, 202, 224, 276, 289, 348, 369, 375, 382
Lee, Muna, 340
Le Gallienne, Richard, 343
Lieberman, Elias, 339
Lindsay, Vachel, 229–245; also 12, 176, 181, 198, 199, 259, 261, 262, 289, 312, 348, 375, 381
Long, Haniel 343
Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth, 8, 11, 25, 35
Lovelace, Sir Richard, 4
Lowell, Amy, 214–228; also 97, 136, 181, 199, 291, 293, 297
Lowell, James Russell, 11, 25, 35, 215, 368
Lowes, John Livingston, 214
Loy, Mina, 199, 215, 303

MacGill, Patrick, 348
Mackaye, Percy, 117
Markham, Edwin, 115, 116, 348
Marlowe, Christopher, 4, 314

Masefield, John, 5, 222, 248, 312, 348
Mason, Walt, 381
Massey, Gerald, 348
Masters, Edgar Lee, 163–180; also 12, 66, 124, 181, 183, 192, 198, 199, 216, 223, 248, 261, 262, 271, 348, 375
Mather, Cotton, 7
Matthews, Washington, 98
Maynard, Theodore, 140
McClellan, George Marion, 111
McKay, Claude, 107, 108
Meeker, Marjorie, 343
Menken, Adah Isaacs, 56–67; also 93, 94, 270, 359, 368, 375
Micah, 347
Middleton, Scudder, 338
Millay, Edna St. Vincent, 199–213; also 12, 181, 197, 198, 224, 261, 264, 276, 375
Miller, Joaquin, 375
Milton, John, 4, 6, 14, 69, 71, 140, 181, 280
Mitchell, Ruth Comfort, 352
Monroe, Harriet, 167
Moody, William Vaughn, 113, 114, 348
Moore, Marianne, 170, 199, 215, 303
Mordell, Albert, 17, 18
More, Paul Elmore, 233, 380
Morley, Christopher, 338
Morrell, Rev. William, 6
Morris, William, 5, 348
Morton, David, 327, 328

Negro Folk Rhymes, 104, 105
Negro Poetry, 102–11
Negro Spirituals, 102–104
Neihardt, John G., 163, 199
Nordau, Max, 297
Norman Influence, 2–12, and elsewhere
Norton, Allen, 295, 296
Noyes, Alfred, 5

Oakes, Urian, 7
O'Brien, Edward J., 336
O'Donnell, Charles J., 315
O'Neill, Rose, 275–289; also 12, 99, 102, 181, 198, 199, 312, 375
Oppenheim, James, 364–369; also 199, 261
O'Reilly, John Boyle, 114, 348
Ossian, 46, 66
"Others," 298, 302, 303

Pearson, James Larkin, 334
Pegram, William, 180
Percy, William Alexander, 327
Pinckney, Edward Coate, 8
Pindar, 140
Pitkin, Walter B., 94, 154
Poe, Edgar Allan, 13-34; also 9, 12, 35, 37, 40, 50, 51, 64, 68, 69, 72, 74, 75, 81, 94, 97, 106, 146, 158, 276, 278, 289, 312, 375, 377
Poetry, elements, 48–51; defined, 226, 227
—— and life, 246–248
—— and living speech, 159, 160, 254
—— and slang, 260, 261
—— and intelligibility, 311–313
—— and music, 381–382; of the future, 381–383
Pope, Alexander, 4, 12, 20, 127
Pound, Ezra, 98, 102, 199, 295, 297, 376
Pushkin, Alexander, 106
Pye, Henry James, 163, 175, 228

Raleigh, Sir Walter, 14, 348
Reade, John, 98
Reese, Lizette Woodworth, 117
Rhys, Ernest, 247, 275, 287
Rice, Cale Young, 199
Richardson, Warfield Creath, 26
Ridge, Lola, 355–357, 376

Riley, James Whitcomb, 117
Rittenhouse, Jessie B., 334
Robertson, Dr. John W., 30
Robinson, Corinne Roosevelt, 343
Robinson, Edwin Arlington, 119-141; also 12, 69, 79, 90, 94, 142, 168, 181, 186, 199, 215, 216, 222, 224, 261, 270, 312, 348, 375
Rogers Alex, 111
Rose, William Stewart, 163
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 5, 295
Roth, Samuel, 357–359, 367

Sandburg, Carl, 246–264; also 12, 66, 99, 181, 198, 199, 216, 262, 312, 348, 368, 375, 376, 378, 381
Sappho, 65, 140, 205, 377
Sarett, Lew, 99, 100, 101
Schauffler, Robert Haven, 352
Scott, Sir Walter, 5
Seeger, Alan, 182
Seiffert, Marjorie Allen, 343
Service, Robert W., 381
Shadwell, Thomas, 163
Shakespeare, William, 4, 6, 9, 12, 14, 46, 49, 51, 54, 69, 71, 72, 73, 76, 95, 129, 133, 139, 140, 142, 205, 231, 257, 311, 312, 314, 348, 376
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 5, 9, 25, 26, 65, 71, 140, 146, 182, 289, 311, 348
Sidney, Sir Philip, 4, 11
Simms, William Gilmore, 8
Skinner, Constance Lindsay, 98, 101
Song of Roland, 2, 6
Sophocles, 140
Southey, Robert, 5, 348
Spencer, Anne, 111
Spenser, Edmund, 4, 69, 140
Speyer, Leonora, 320, 321
Stedman, Edmund Clarence, 30
Stein, Gertrude, 295
Sterling, George, 117, 375
Stevens, Wallace, 303
Stork, Charles Wharton, 343
Suckling, Sir John, 4
Surrey, Earl of (Henry Howard), 3
Swinburne, Algernon Charles, 5, 25, 58, 73, 182, 348
Symonds, John Addington, 38
Symons, Arthur, 164, 378, 380
Synge, J. M., 5, 248

Tabb, Father, 315
Taggard, Genevieve, 322, 323
Talley, Thomas W., 104
Tanaquil, Paul, 340, 341
Tate, Nahum, 163, 175
Taylor, Bayard, 9
Teasdale, Sara, 316, 317, 334
Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, 5, 9, 11, 26, 69, 97, 135, 163
Thayer, Mary Dixon, 337
Thompson, Francis, 5, 13, 79, 202, 312, 315
Thomson, James, 4, 116
Thomson, James, 64, 140
Tom-a-Bedlam, 313
Torrence, Ridgeley, 324
Traubel, Horace, 117, 180, 348

Untermeyer, Jean Starr, 361
Untermeyer, Louis, 171, 359, 360

Van Cleef, Augustus, 17
Villon, François, 260
Vinal, Harold, 341
Virgil, 140, 312

Wagstaff, Blanche Shoemaker, 296
Ward, Lester, 202, 208
Warton, Thomas, 163
Watkins, Lucian B., 111
Wattles, Willard, 324, 325

Weaver, John V. A., 213
Webster, John, 4, 314
Welles, Winifred, 343
Wesley, Charles, 230
Wheatley, Phyllis, 7, 106, 262
Wheelock, John Hall, 181–198; also 12, 78, 199, 202, 261, 276, 311, 375
Whitehead, William, 163
Whitman, Alberry A., 106
Whitman, Walt, 35–55; also 8, 9, 12, 13, 57, 63, 65, 66, 68, 69, 72, 73, 79, 81, 94, 97, 106, 117, 122, 140, 158, 164, 167, 168, 173, 182, 188, 201, 212, 215, 231, 248, 250, 253, 260, 261, 262, 276, 289, 291, 297, 348, 354, 368, 369, 370, 375, 377, 378, 380, 383
Whittier, John Greenleaf, 11, 34, 35
Wickham, Anna, 312
Widdemer, Margaret, 350, 351
Wilde, Oscar, 64, 279, 348
Wilde, Richard Henry, 8
Wilkinson, Marguerite, 343
Williams, William Carlos, 303
Willis, Nathaniel Parker, 11, 18, 19
Wolf, Adolf, 180, 303
Wolf, Robert L., 305, 362
Wood, Charles Erskine Scott, 354, 355, 375
Wood, Mildred Cummer, 362–364
Woodberrry, George Edward, 117
Wordsworth, William, 4, 26, 52, 69, 97, 163, 175, 248
Wyatt, Sir Thomas, 3
Wylie, Elinor, 262–274; also 12, 157, 181, 199, 224, 261, 296, 312, 375

Yeats, William Butler, 5

Zephaniah, 347

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